

# **Nuclear Proliferation and Declining U.S. Hegemony**

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## **Introduction**

On August 29, 1949, The Soviet Union successfully tested its first nuclear fission bomb, signaling the end of U.S. hegemony in the international arena. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the world's single most powerful nation watched in awe as the very symbols of its prosperity fell to rubble in the streets of New York City. The United States undisputedly "has a greater share of world power than any other country in history" (Brooks and Wolforth, 2008, pg. 2). Yet even a global hegemon is ultimately fallible and vulnerable to rash acts of violence as it conducts itself in a rational manner and assumes the same from other states. Conventional strategic thought and military action no longer prevail in an era of increased globalization. Developing states and irrational actors play increasingly influential roles in the international arena. Beginning with the U.S.S.R. in 1949, nuclear proliferation has exponentially increased states' relative military capabilities as well as global levels of political instability. Through ideas such as nuclear peace theory, liberal political scholars developed several models under which nuclear weapons not only maintain but increase global tranquility. These philosophies assume rationality on the part of political actors in an increasingly irrational world plagued by terrorism, despotic totalitarianism, geo-political instability and failed international institutionalism. Realistically, "proliferation of nuclear [weapons]...constitutes a threat to international peace and security" (UN Security Council, 2006, pg. 1). Nuclear security threats arise in four forms: the threat of existing arsenals, the emergence of new nuclear states, the collapse of international non-proliferation regimes and the rise of nuclear terrorism. Due to their asymmetric destabilizing and equalizing effects, nuclear weapons erode the unipolarity of the international system by balancing political actors' relative military power and security. In the face of this inevitable nuclear proliferation and its effects on relative power, the United States must accept a position of declining hegemony.

### **Proliferation Basics and Conventional Theory**

Despite nuclear proliferation's controversial nature, states continue to develop the technologies requisite for constructing nuclear weapons. What motivates men to create "the most terrifying weapons ever created by human kind...unique in their destructive power and in their lack of direct military utility"(Cirincione, 2007, pg. 47)? Why then do states pursue the controversial and costly path of proliferation? To states, nuclear weapons comprise a symbolic asset of strength and "as a prerequisite for great power status" (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 47). On a simplistic level, nuclear weapons make states feel more powerful, respected and influential in world politics. When it is in their best interest, states develop nuclear capabilities to ensure their own sovereignty and to potentially deter other states from attacking. According to realist thinkers, nuclear weapons provide the "ultimate security guarantor" in an anarchic international system (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 51). Proliferation optimists and rational deterrence theorists, such as Kenneth Waltz, argue proliferation stabilizes international security and promotes peace. Rational deterrence theory states that nations refrain from nuclear conflict because of the extraordinarily high cost. Arguably the most powerful military technology ever developed by man, nuclear weapons have only twice been deployed in actual conflict, due to the devastation they incur. Nuclear weapons increase the potential damage of any given military conflict due to their immense destructive capabilities. Summarizing rational deterrence framework, Waltz asserts "states are deterred by the prospect of suffering severe damage and by their inability to do much to limit it" (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg 32). According to the rational deterrence framework, political actors refrain from both conventional and nuclear conflict because of the unacceptably high costs.

Ultimately an assumption, rational deterrence theory lacks any empirically tested evidence. Nuclear proliferation exponentially increases the possibility of non-proliferation regime collapse and nuclear conflict, reducing all states' relative power. Nuclear peace theory seems plausible, but like any mathematical model it may only marginally apply to world politics and the dynamics of nuclear proliferation, due to the fact that "international security is not reducible to the theory of mathematical games" (Bracken, 2002, pg. 403). Rather, the spread of nuclear weapons exponentially decreases the stability of regional and global politics by intensifying regional

rivalries and political tensions, both of which may potentially catalyze a nuclear catastrophe. Frustrated with a lack of results through conventional conflict, desperate states may look to nuclear arsenals as a source of absolute resolution for any given conflict. The use of nuclear weapons, even in a limited theater, could plausibly trigger chain reactions rippling across the globe. With their interests and sovereignty threatened, other nuclear states will eventually use their own weapons in an effort to ensure national security. President Kennedy warned of the danger of nuclear proliferation in 1963:

I ask you to stop and think for a moment what it would mean to have nuclear weapons in so many hands, in the hands of countries...there would be no rest for anyone then, no stability, no real security...there would only be the increased chance of accidental war, and an increased necessity for the great powers to involve themselves in what otherwise would be local conflicts (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 103).

Proliferation decreases the relative security of all states not only through the possibility of direct conflict, but also by threatening foreign and domestic interests. As the sole international hegemon, the U.S. seeks to use its power to insure its security and influence international politics in a way that reflects its own interests and values (Huntington, 1993, pg. 70). In addition to creating a direct security threat, further proliferation jeopardizes the United States' ability to project its primacy and promote its interests internationally.

### **Proliferation and United States Foreign Policy**

#### ***The Middle East***

Nuclear proliferation decreases the United States' military strength relative to other nations as they develop nuclear arsenals, creating a paradox of "weak state power"(Ae-Park, 2001, pg. 451). Essentially, nuclear weapons place states on a level playing field, producing an equalizing effect. Relatively weaker nations "favor nuclearization as a way of leveling the playing field" (Trachtenberg, 2002, pg. 152). In regions vital to U.S. political affairs, proliferation escalates political tensions, potentially decreasing U.S. influence. In the Middle East, increased friction among Arabic states with unstable U.S. relations would severely inhibit the United States' access to the

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region's oil resources. The U.S. Department of Defense stated the following sentiment to this effect in its 2001 report "Proliferation: Threat and Response":

U.S. goals in the Middle East and Africa include securing a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace...building and maintaining security arrangements that assure the stability of the Gulf region and unimpeded commercial access to its petroleum reserves...In this volatile region, the proliferation of [nuclear] weapons and the means of delivering them poses a significant challenge to the ability of the United States to achieve these goals (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2001, pg. 33).

Post World War II, the U.S. maintains a military presence in the Middle East to ensure access to petroleum reserves. Proliferation constitutes a pressing threat to regional stability as Gulf states compete to control critical oil supplies in order to further their political and military objectives. The spread of nuclear weapons would escalate conflict tensions and increase the will to confront the United States and threaten its regional interests. States, such as Iran, recognize they cannot conventionally match U.S. military power and thus seek alternative means to combat the U.S., in an effort to offset their own relative weakness (US Department of Defense, 2001, pg.1).

### *Asia*

Nuclear weapons' equalizing effect makes them increasingly appealing as an asymmetrical means to counter the United States' conventional military superiority. North Korea currently pursues a controversial nuclear program to combat power disparities with the United States and other major powers in the Far East, such as China and Japan. North Korea's proliferation is perhaps the most threatening of all, in terms of U.S. interests, for several reasons. A nuclear North Korea poses a major threat as a supplier of nuclear technology. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, North Korea already grosses an average of \$580 million annually from missile sales to northern Africa and the Middle East, making it the single largest exporter worldwide (CIA, 2003, pg. 56). Should Pyongyang obtain nuclear weapons, it would become a major exporter of nuclear technologies. The emergence of new nuclear states in both northeast

Asia and the Middle East, as a product of North Korean exports, would drastically exacerbate regional instability, seriously inhibiting U.S. influence and reducing the non-proliferation regime's efficiency. Unstable regimes in these newly proliferated states establish a major threat not only to the U.S., but to global security. These regimes become prime sources for radical militant and terrorist groups to obtain nuclear weapons.

Most alarmingly, if North Korea goes nuclear, other states in the region may question their own security and decide to follow suit. Dick Cheney stated the following regarding North Korea's proliferation on *Meet the Press* on March 16, 2003:

A nuclear-armed North Korea...will probably set off an arms race in that part of the world, and others, perhaps Japan, for example, may be forced to consider whether they want to readdress the nuclear question (Cheney, 2003).

Despite Cheney's questionable record on political forecasts, he rightly acknowledges that North Korea's proliferation may force other countries to pursue their own nuclear programs. Japan's civilian stockpile of weapon-grade plutonium could plausibly be converted to hundreds of nuclear warheads in a matter of months or even weeks (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 105). If Japan were to go nuclear, South Korea would likely follow due to a security imperative, despite U.S. countermeasures. The resulting proliferation of northeast Asia erodes U.S. interests and assets; U.S. businesses currently conduct more than \$500 billion in transactions in the region and have invested another \$150 billion (US Department of Defense, 2001, pg.7). Proliferation of northeast Asian states jeopardizes U.S. economic affairs and reduces the United States' ability to use its leverage as an international hegemon, due to the relative bargaining power those states gain through the possession of nuclear weapons.

### **International Ramifications**

Regime stability in both these proliferating and existing nuclear states constitutes a major international security issue. Command and control issues (meaning nuclear arsenals' vulnerability to accidental and unauthorized use) cause special concerns. If the the assumptions of rational framework theory don't hold, it "raises doubts about

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whether any state can build a large nuclear arsenal that is completely secure from accident” (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 73). Emerging nuclear states often lack the financial resources needed to produce safe weapons designs. The international community’s non-proliferation posture also strongly inhibits the ability to conduct full-scale nuclear weapons tests, preventing the development of effective and safe designs. Combined with the domestic instability present in many proliferating states, this lack of testing makes accidental detonations become extremely plausible. Domestic stability is critical, as “political unrest can increase the risk of nuclear weapons accidents by encouraging unsafe transportation, or testing operations” (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 82). During China’s Cultural Revolution, Marshal Nie Rongzhen launched a test missile eight hundred kilometers across China, armed with a live nuclear warhead, to display the successes of its nuclear program (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 82). Nie’s decision shows that newly proliferating states may determine their actual behavior by the illogical objectives of military organizations within those states. The parochial interests of these military organizations may not coincide with national interest, and so lead to accidental uses of nuclear weapons. This further degrades deterrence measures despite rational state interests to the contrary.

Strict military control over nuclear arsenals also creates both domestic and international security hazards, as military officials and weapons operators in limited combat theaters have different interests than civilian politicians charged with implementing policy. Steve Sagan describes the mentality of military officials in terms of their own interests:

Even when a professional military service acts in relatively rational ways to maximize its interests---protecting its power, size, autonomy, or organizational essence---such actions do not necessarily reflect the organizational interests of the military as a whole, much less the national interests of the state (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 52).

Military leaders minimize diplomatic considerations in any given conflict, focusing instead on their ultimate objective, victory. Soldiers train to win; they ignore secondary considerations and repercussions. During China’s proliferation in the 1960’s, senior U.S. military officials advocated a preemptive destruction of its developing arsenals, arguing that “the attainment of a nuclear capability by Communist

China will have a marked impact on the security posture of the United States and the Free World” (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 192). Military officials view proliferation and possession of nuclear weapons by other states as detrimental to U.S. national security and relative power.

### **Preventative Measures of Current Nuclear Powers**

Rather than accept a decline of relative military and political power, states may feasibly consider a preventative war to prohibit the proliferation of rival states. Sagan suggests that the course of preventative war will “more likely be chosen when military leaders, who minimize diplomatic considerations...have a significant degree of influence over the final decision” (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 61). Military officials have an extremely narrow view of war and the ramifications of actions taken during war. In his address to the National Security Council in 1954 regarding the U.S.S.R.’s growing nuclear program, Admiral Radford stated that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) could guarantee a successful outcome in a nuclear war if preemptive strategies were adopted (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 61). Several members of the JCS adopted the preventative war mentality during the early stages of the Cold War, and believed that nuclear superiority could in fact be used in conflict (Dingham, 1989, pg. 63). While the U.S. has never engaged in a preventative war, Sagan argues that the likelihood of preventative wars occurring “will increase in the future since strict centralized civilian control over military organizations is problematic in some new and potential proliferant states” (Sagan and Waltz, 2003, pg. 61). Regardless of proliferation policies, proliferating states create security issues for the United States and the world. As the process of proliferation spreads, so does the threat of preventative war, and thus the probability of nuclear conflict.

### ***Russia***

In this same light, states currently maintaining arsenals of hundreds, or even thousands, of nuclear weapons pose a major international security hazard in terms of the safety and stability of their stockpiles; command and control issues do not only apply to proliferating states. Former Soviet Russia maintains an arsenal of roughly 7,200 active warheads with another 8,800 in reserve, or inactive. Moscow keeps these weapons “on hair trigger alert, ready to

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launch within fifteen minutes” (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 97). Its arsenal is, however, aging, and Russia’s early warning systems have inevitably fallen into disrepair with time. As stockpiles and intelligence capabilities deteriorate over time, the likelihood of an accidental or unauthorized launch greatly increases, forcing states to view each other’s arsenals with suspicion. Uncertainty raises political tensions, further escalating the likelihood of conflict between major powers in a nuclear world. Russia in particular is a source of major concern as it slowly loses control and vigilance over its vast nuclear arsenal. Existing stockpiles such as Russia’s present an appealing opportunity for radical militant groups to obtain nuclear weapons. In 2001-2002, Russian officials acknowledged four separate instances of terrorist groups conducting reconnaissance on its nuclear weapons (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 91). While the facilities housing these weapons were designed with security in mind, few if any could stand against an assault on scale with the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York. Terrorists demonstrated the will and propensity for violence on an unimaginable scale. Former Senator Sam Nunn warned that Russian stockpiles “are the nuclear weapons most attractive to terrorists--even more valuable than fissile materials and certainly more portable than strategic warheads” (Ferguson and Potter, 2004, pg. 46). Russia’s arsenal is considered at such high risk because of the vast number of warheads within the state under weakened security arrangements due to a severely impoverished military structure.

### *Pakistan*

Like Russia, Pakistan’s acute political instability and the vulnerability of its existing weapons make it especially susceptible to the danger of terrorists seizing its nuclear weapons. According to Harvard’s Graham Allison, the paths of proliferation and terrorism intersect in Pakistan (Sanger, 2009). David Sanger of the New York Times quotes Harvard’s Graham Allison in his January 8<sup>th</sup> article on Pakistan’s instability:

The unknown variable here is the future of Pakistan itself, because it’s not hard to envision a situation in which the state’s authority falls apart and you’re not sure who’s in control of the weapons, the nuclear labs, the materials (Sanger, 2008).



The insurgency jeopardizes not only Pakistan's weapons, but also its laboratories and enrichment facilities. It is easy enough to train security personnel to lock up nuclear devices, but tracking the amount of fissile material being produced in Pakistan's laboratories and enrichment facilities proves much more difficult. The U.S. spends roughly \$100 million annually to promote the safety of Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure, in order to avoid the construction of a bomb by terrorists using stolen fissile materials. The U.S., however, still does not know the location of the state's fissile materials or how much is currently under development.

Despite the spread of the insurgency in Pakistan, Islamabad still refuses to disclose the locations of its nuclear facilities. Pakistani officials refrain from releasing the information in fear "that the United States might be tempted to seize or destroy Pakistan's arsenal if the insurgency appeared about to engulf areas near Pakistan's nuclear sites" (Sanger, 2009). The U.S. has become increasingly worried that insurgents will somehow prompt Pakistan's government to move the missiles and seize one in transport. One U.S. official was quoted saying, "Once you've figured out the weapon is gone, it's probably too late" (Sanger, 2007). U.S. officials have grown tired of Pakistan's magnanimous assurances that the situation is under control, especially in light of Islamabad's previous support for Islamic militant groups (Ferguson and Potter, 2004, pg. 55).

## **Proliferation and Terrorism**

### ***The Ultimate Catastrophe***

Increasing radicalism and militant insurgency makes securing and ensuring the stability of existing nuclear arsenals absolutely imperative. Terrorism poses the single largest threat to U.S. hegemony. Believing acts of mass destruction can create the global conflict they seek, modern terrorist groups fuel fear in a global audience. Scholars Charles Ferguson and William Potter note the following in their 2004 study *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism*:

Today's terrorism is often fueled by extremist religious ideologies that rationalize destruction, vengeance, and punishment as both necessary ends in themselves and as tools to achieve a better world (Ferguson and Potter, 2004, pg. 190).

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Several Islamist terrorist groups currently seek to obtain nuclear arms as a means to achieve their political and social objectives; existing stockpiles with deteriorating safeguards present a prime source for these groups' proliferation. Should one such group eventually obtain a nuclear weapon, the U.S. would be hard-pressed to take any sort of action to prevent a nuclear attack. Terrorists possess neither physical assets to protect nor a home address, and are thus extremely difficult to deter. Securing both developing and existing stockpiles needs to become a security imperative if the U.S. wishes to avert nuclear catastrophe.

Terrorist organizations need not seize a nuclear weapon, however. Weapon-grade plutonium would suffice for the construction of a nuclear device (Ferguson and Potter, 1989, pg. 190). A terrorist organization need only steal or purchase either twenty-five kilograms of highly enriched uranium, or HEU, or eight kilograms of plutonium, to construct a gun assembly type bomb, similar to the one dropped on Hiroshima in World War II. Though only eight states currently possess nuclear arms (North Korea is excluded as its weapons total is uncertain), fifty states have access to highly enriched weapon-grade uranium, or HEU. As of 2003, conservative estimates place the global stock of weapon-grade plutonium and highly enriched uranium at 3,730 metric tons, with a bomb equivalent of 304,800 (Cirincione, 2007, pg. 190). Allison claims that the science for bomb construction is in the public domain, meaning an organized and well-funded group could feasibly construct a bomb within five years of obtaining fissile material (Allison, 2004, pg. 12). Ultimately, a dedicated and devoted organization will inevitably obtain a nuclear weapon and be able to use it "without fear of retaliation" (Trachtenberg, 2002, pg. 146). Allison states the following in his book regarding the likelihood of a nuclear terrorist attack:

Given the number of actors with serious intent, the accessibility of weapons or nuclear materials from which elementary weapons could be constructed, and the almost limitless ways in which terrorists could smuggle a weapon through American borders...a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not (Allison, 2004, pg. 15).

Should a militant group gain control of a nuclear weapon, either through construction or seizure, deterring its use would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. A nuclear terrorist attack on U.S. soil will be inevitable if the current non-proliferation policies are maintained.

### ***Counteraction and Reformation of Policy***

The threat of nuclear terrorism is currently on the rise; however, preemptive measures can be taken to prevent such a catastrophe. As the sole international hegemon, the U.S. needs to rethink its role as an advocate and enforcer of non-proliferation. A bipolar power structure no longer exists in world politics; the U.S. sits alone atop global hierarchy. The United States needs to take an active role in non-proliferation and change the way it conducts international political discourse in the second nuclear age. "Today, the nuclear threat posed by other nuclear-armed states is being eclipsed by a new threat, that of nuclear instruments in the hands of non-state, terrorist organizations" (Ferguson and Potter, 2004, pg. 318). Terrorism comprises the greatest threat to U.S. primacy; Washington needs to adapt its policies in a manner that allows it to maintain and resolve diplomatic relations with irrational political actors.

It would be impossible for the U.S. to monitor all nuclear arsenals and prevent proliferation on a state-by-state case. Regulating fissile materials at the source would be the simplest and most inexpensive means to prohibit nuclear terrorism. Obtaining fissile materials, or an actual weapon, poses the greatest problem for terrorist groups seeking to gain possession of a nuclear weapon. Restricting the flow and spread of fissile materials means terrorists can neither purchase nor steal a nuclear weapon.

In addition, Graham Allison asserts that in order to fully prevent nuclear terrorism and regulate the flow of fissile materials, the United States must adopt a policy of "three no's"; no loose nuclear weapons, no nascent nuclear weapons and no new nuclear weapons states. The international community must agree to secure existing arsenals to a sufficient standard to prevent theft. Secondly, states cannot be allowed to construct enrichment facilities capable of creating HEU. Third, other states cannot develop nuclear weapons.

### Conclusions

Allison's ideas seem sound in theory, but cannot be applied in practice. Proliferation is inevitable, and its effects will ultimately deteriorate U.S. hegemony. The world could very plausibly witness the proliferation of five or ten new nuclear states within the next few decades. As more states acquire nuclear instruments, the U.S. will be forced to further change its policies and adapt to a multi-lateral nuclear theater. Proliferation places conventionally weaker states in a better bargaining position with the United States, forcing the U.S. into a position of acquiescence. A multilateral nuclear theater poses too many issues for the United States to resolve unilaterally. States such as North Korea and Pakistan refuse U.S. intervention; North Korea even withdrew from the 1994 Agreed Framework and "may have diverted fissile material for nuclear weaponry" (US Department of Defense, 2001). Though riddled with domestic instability and stricken by insurgency, Pakistan refuses U.S. aid in directly securing its nuclear sites and continues to hide their locations. Russia's control over its vast nuclear arsenal slowly diminishes with time, increasing the likelihood that terrorist groups may seize a weapon. To continue as the sole hegemon, the U.S. inevitably must violate national sovereignty to promote its interests. Infringement on states' rights would only escalate tensions, eventually leading to conflict. In order to fight a multi-front war on such a large scale, the U.S. needs to radically change its policies. Regardless, the U.S. cannot continue to project power in the manner it has done since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Steve Sagan is right in asserting that more is worse regarding the spread of nuclear weapons. The U.S. no longer will be the sole international hegemon; rather it will merely be the first among states equally capable of instigating the ultimate catastrophe.

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