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Here We Go Again

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It is often argued that nuclear weapons have no redeeming value, and that any state that goes nuclear is engaging in dangerous and self-defeating behavior. Thus, President Clinton maintains that India's recent nuclear tests were a "terrible mistake." The implication is that nuclear weapons should be eliminated altogether.

In fact, nuclear weapons are a superb deterrent for states that feel threatened by rival powers. Simply put, no state is likely to attack the homeland or vital interests of a nuclear-armed state for fear that such a move might trigger a horrific nuclear response. Not surprisingly, therefore, states are often tempted to acquire nuclear weapons to enhance their security.

This logic explains America's longstanding love affair with the bomb and why it will never junk its nuclear deterrent, even as it tries to deny others that option.

Israel is another case in point. Although it enjoys an overwhelming conventional superiority and none of its Arab foes have nuclear weapons, Israel still built an impressive nuclear deterrent. This is hardly surprising, given the legacy of the Holocaust and the fact that Israel lives in a dangerous part of the globe. Would President Clinton argue that Israel made a terrible mistake in going nuclear?

India's decision to bring its bomb out of the basement is based on equally reasonable strategic logic. India shares a long and disputed border with China. Not only does China have its own nuclear arsenal, but it also may be on the road to superpower status.

Moreover, China has been supplying nuclear and missile technology to Pakistan, its close ally. Pakistan has fought three wars with India in the past 50 years, has unsettled territorial disputes with India, and remains India's most bitter rival. Indian officials are understandably fearful of a hostile encirclement by China and Pakistan, and perhaps even the United States, which has historical ties to Pakistan and is now trying to improve relations with China.

So it is surely in India's self-interest to build a nuclear deterrent -- as it will be for Pakistan to follow suit. But from the perspective of the United States, the ideal world is one in which it alone has nuclear weapons. Then the United States would not risk direct attack on its homeland or indirect damage from the fallout from nuclear wars between

other nations. It could also use its nuclear monopoly to coerce or intimidate other states, and could intervene with conventional forces around the globe without fear of nuclear attack on its forces. For these reasons, the United States has gone to great lengths since 1945 to thwart nuclear proliferation.

During the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union could dampen proliferation with relative ease. The global nature of their competition meant that both superpowers became deeply involved in most world trouble spots. Neither superpower wanted its allies in those contested regions to have nuclear weapons, so they gave security guarantees to vulnerable allies, as the United States did with Germany and Japan. Or they issued nuclear threats on behalf of allies during crises, as the Soviet Union did for Egypt in 1956 and for Egypt and Syria in 1973. Or they pressured allies not to go nuclear, as the United States did with South Korea and Taiwan in the late 1970's.

But today the Soviet Union is no longer there to dampen proliferation in its former sphere of influence. Instead, its collapse has raised the risk that nuclear weapons, materials and scientists will seep to the rest of the world.

And the United States must now exert more conscious effort to curb proliferation. During the cold war, nonproliferation was a natural side effect of American global activism. This ambitious agenda gave the United States reason to protect its many allies from Soviet aggression; this protection also had the benefit of easing those allies' appetite for nuclear weapons. Now it is harder for the United States to summon the will to remain a provider of global security. The Americans still have many carrots and sticks to use against proliferation, but perhaps less will to use them.

The new international situation also presents the United States with three other management problems. First, in the absence of the Soviet threat, the American military has shrunk in size by roughly one-third and will likely shrink more over time. This means that the United States will be less able to extend credible security guarantees to vulnerable nations or issue effective threats on their behalf in order to prevent proliferation. The arms race among East Asia powers, for example, is motivated in large measure by growing fear in the region that the American pacifier will not be there for the long haul.

Second, nuclear knowledge will continue to spread, and the cost of developing nuclear weapons will continue to fall. In the 1940's only the richest states could contemplate building nuclear forces. Today more nations can aspire to nuclear status, and the number of potential aspirants will grow in the future as the price of building these weapons drops further. The Soviet collapse accelerates this trend by creating a potential cheap underground marketplace for nuclear materials.

Third, without a clear and present danger to force an ordering of priorities, myriad competing interests and values vie to dominate American foreign policy, sometimes producing contradictory policies that make proliferation more likely.

Consider NATO expansion. This new alignment makes Germany and NATO's three new members feel more secure, but it also angers and offends the Russians, giving them reason to undermine American policy in other regions of the world. On the proliferation front, the result is that Russia is supplying Iran with technologies that will help make Iran a nuclear power and pushing to weaken and ultimately end sanctions on Iraq. It is also unwilling to punish India for going nuclear. Thus one hand in Washington undoes the work of the other.

Another case of clashing interests involves China and India. The United States wants to avoid a confrontation with China by engaging it diplomatically and economically, which is why President Clinton will visit Beijing next month. India fears China's growing power, however, and is already suspicious that the United States is trying to reach an accommodation with China at India's expense. So Mr. Clinton's visit may solve one problem but worsen another by causing anxiety in India, making it feel less secure and more convinced than ever that it needs a robust nuclear deterrent.

All these factors combine to make it likely that other states will follow in India's footsteps. This means that the United States will have to learn to live with the spread of nuclear weapons in the decades ahead. We should try to manage and contain this process, but we cannot stop it.