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S U M M A R Y

Instead of treating nuclear weapons and materials as problems wherever they exist, the Bush administration has pursued a “democratic bomb” strategy, bending nonproliferation rules for friendly democracies and refusing to negotiate directly with “evil” nondemocratic regimes such as North Korea and Iran. Yet regime change and democratization cannot solve major proliferation challenges in the necessary timeframe and actually can make them worse. Nonproliferation should take precedence over democratization. Universal rules remain essential and must be invigorated, which requires cooperation with major powers that differ on democracy. ■

“Democratic Bomb”: Failed Strategy

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North Korea’s nuclear test and Iran’s defiant uranium enrichment program are more than specific failures of U.S. nonproliferation policy. They are symptoms of a dysfunctional strategy that not only fails to solve tough cases but actually makes proliferation more likely. Understanding the inherent liabilities of this strategy can help American and international policy makers design a more effective replacement.

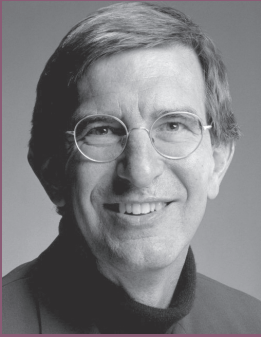
Regimes, rather than weapons, are at the heart of the Bush administration’s broader national security strategy. President George W. Bush’s famous “axis of evil” speech in January 2002 established that the United States would seek security by removing exceptionally dangerous regimes, namely, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Proliferation is what defined them as targets. In subsequent years, rhetorical hard edges have been filed off the strategy and the positive goal of transforming tyrannies into democracies was added.

Bad Guys, Not Bombs, Are the Problem

“Democratic peace theory,” which holds that mature democracies don’t go to war with one another, gave intellectual backing to a division of the world into democratic friends and non-democratic foes. In this worldview, endorsed

by Vice President Richard Cheney, UN Ambassador John Bolton, Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph, Undersecretary of Defense Stephen Cambone, and strategist Richard Perle, it makes little sense to pursue treaties that limit the military power of all states, including the United States and friendly democracies such as Israel and India. Contrary to the central premise of the nuclear nonproliferation regime—that nuclear weapons per se are a problem—the new strategy posits that the problem is bad guys with nuclear weapons. (The new nonproliferation strategists tend to pay less attention to Russia, China, and Pakistan not because they are effective democracies, but because they are too big to transform or disarm.)

Pessimism about the feasibility of controlling nuclear technology in a globalized world accelerated this nonproliferation policy shift. In the eyes of some policy makers, the A. Q. Khan network originating in Pakistan symbolized the futility of technology control. Khan’s team covertly bought and sold blueprints and components for making uranium enrichment factories and bombs, staying several steps ahead of export control laws, customs officials, and intelligence agencies for decades.



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Traditional nonproliferation strategists counter that the Khan network shows that the rules-based system needs to be strengthened, not devalued. Khan's operations in Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea (though not Libya) were detected well before news of them broke in 2002. And most of the network's key technology suppliers and middlemen were Europeans whose activities were well known to their governments. More than technological determinism, the problem was political-legal laxity. There is, for example, no binding international requirement to notify the International Atomic Energy Agency of all transfers of equipment vital to producing fissile materials and nuclear weapons. National export controls remain too loose. It is not an international crime to engage in nuclear weapon proliferation. All of these deficiencies could be corrected.

Regime changers dismiss the rule builders' argument with another type of pessimism. They argue that an insufficient number of states could be induced to adopt meaningful export controls and that still fewer would have the will and capacity to actually enforce controls. The majority of the world would want concessions and benefits from the United States in return for their cooperation. The process would be prolonged, and the result would not be worth the cost. Eliminating bad guys seems easier.

As a result of this approach, the United States since 2001 has not engaged in direct negotiations with the leaders who make nuclear policy in Iran and North Korea and refused for several years even to support friendly countries' efforts to negotiate with those two governments.

Democratic Bombs Are Good

Beyond targeting bad leaders, the new strategists seek to reduce penalties imposed on friendly democracies—that is, to bend the rules for friends.

Since the mid-1960s, the United States has not sought to pressure or cajole Israel to give up its nuclear weapon capabilities. Israel's discretion in not demonstrating that it

has nuclear weapons has facilitated Washington's tacit support; the fact that it is a democratic friend makes it worthy of a double standard.

The Bush administration extends the logic of U.S. treatment of Israel into a strategic principle. India is the first explicit application of the strategy. In July 2005, President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a plan for U.S.-Indian nuclear cooperation that abandoned a long-standing international approach to nonproliferation that prohibited nuclear cooperation with any states that do not apply international safeguards on all of their nuclear facilities. As R. Nicholas Burns, the undersecretary of state for political affairs, put it, "If people are bothered by double standards in the world, they happen all the time. We treat law-abiding democratic countries that are friends of ours differently than law-breaking authoritarian governments."

Australia may be the next friendly democratic country for which the United States will seek to create a double standard. The Australian government has expressed interest in developing facilities to enrich uranium for export and/or for use in future domestic reactors. That sort of expansion of fissile material production to non-nuclear weapon states is precisely what President Bush and other international figures, including International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Muhammad Al Baradei, have recently sought to prevent, most contentiously in Iran. Yet, Dennis Spurgeon, the U.S. assistant secretary for nuclear energy, seemed to imply American support for Australian enrichment by saying, "Australia is viewed as a totally reliable and trustworthy country, so I don't think there is any issue whatsoever."

In the wake of North Korea's October nuclear test, some proponents of the democratic-bombs-are-good strategy welcome the prospect that Japan might consider building nuclear weapons. "The Japan card," columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote of the prospect, "remains the only one that carries even the remote possibility of reversing North

Korea’s nuclear program ... Why are we so intent on denying this stable, reliable, democratic ally the means to help us shoulder the burden” of securing the world?

The Failed State of the “Democratic Bomb” Strategy

Hinging nonproliferation policy on the type of government involved—a Democratic Bomb Strategy—is insufficient to protect the United States and the world from nuclear dangers. Each side of the regime-centric strategy—trying to eliminate bad regimes and reward good ones—is risky; the combination of the two compounds the risk.

Peaceful regime change cannot be relied upon to produce new policy directions quickly enough to turn off nuclear weapon acquisition programs. It takes countries less time to acquire the capabilities to build nuclear weapons than to reform their governments and implement genuine democracy. In Iran, for example, even democrats do not foresee major political reform happening in the next ten years. But Iran is highly likely to master the uranium enrichment process in that time if officeholders under its current constitution are not induced to change course.

Nor are democratizing countries likely to give up nuclear weapons or prestigious technology programs such as uranium enrichment. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine’s leader (the former Communist Party chief ideologist) responded to U.S. pressure and blandishments and agreed to transfer all nuclear weapons to Russia. But as Ukraine then began to democratize, the new parliament almost scuttled the arrangement. Persuading the new parliament to make the deal from scratch might not have been possible.

Forced regime change creates its own great dangers. Iraq is the most recent example, and it is the only case where regime change was executed explicitly as a nonproliferation measure. When U.S. forces stormed through Iraq, they did not manage to secure large weapons caches and stockpiles of nuclear materials, which ended up in the hands of future insurgents. If the North

Korean government collapses, how will responsible actors immediately gain control of all its nuclear weapons, plutonium, blueprints, and other critical items? Toppling the nondemocratic governments of North Korea, Iran—or, in the future, the governments of Syria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia—would unleash grave new dangers while turning the United States into a rogue nation that the rest of the world would then try to contain.

Pursuing nonproliferation through regime-change democratization can actually increase rather than reduce demand for nuclear weapons. Leaders in states such as

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Iran and North Korea and perhaps others may have come to see nuclear weapons as the best bulwark against U.S. intervention. After all, the most accepted rationale for a state to seek nuclear weapons is to deter more powerful adversaries from threatening its sovereignty and territory.

U.S. threats to attack unfriendly governments and their nuclear capabilities also help consolidate those regimes’ power domestically. Historically, autocrats and authoritarian governments have used threats of foreign aggression to centralize power and constrain democratic culture and practice.

There is almost no major proliferation challenge that the United States can solve alone. Yet the picking-favorites strategy sabotages international cooperation because not everyone agrees on who is good and who is bad. The differences over such judgments can cause ruptures in the coalitions that are necessary to enforce international rules, and they can even lead to conflict. The United States accepts a nuclear Israel; Egypt and other

Muslim countries do not. Japan with nuclear weapons might be tolerable to the United States, but it would be alarming to Koreans, Chinese, and others. Basing international nonproliferation campaigns on one's identification of friends and foes weakens the cohesion and predictability needed to maintain the rule-based order on which nonproliferation heavily depends.

Part of the problem is that many countries are more commonly seen as gray. The United States today seems to regard Pakistan as a "good" semidemocratic possessor of nuclear weapons, so Washington sells it

dangerous wherever they exist, not just in today's most dangerous states. Terrorists or those who seek to acquire weapons, materials, and technology for illicit purposes don't care about a state's politics. Standards of behavior must therefore be established to protect and account for material everywhere, and all states—whether they are democracies or not—must be held accountable to uphold the standards.

Aggressive democracy promotion undermines the great power cooperation on which nonproliferation success ultimately depends. Any strategy to persuade or coerce a country to reverse a program that has neared the capability to build nuclear weapons requires the full support of all the major powers. The best way to achieve international unity is through the United Nations Security Council. Security Council resolutions made under Chapter VII are mandatory for all states to uphold. But Russia and China hold veto power in the UN Security Council, and they will most likely refuse to support sanctions that would be needed to coerce Iran or other countries to give up nuclear activities so long as they believe that the deeper aim of the United States (and the West) is regime change.

Double standards and selective enforcement of rules will corrode the international nonproliferation system until one day it collapses. For example, the United States' move to change the rules to help India elicits several reactions. Some countries object quietly because they feel, on the principle of equality, that no country should be rewarded for having nuclear weapons. Others—in Egypt, Japan, and elsewhere—surmise that since they are friendly toward the United States, Washington ultimately would not press them hard if they hedged their nuclear status. Russia and France support the change because they, too, hope to expand commercial nuclear relations with India, but they will hold the United States accountable for any negative repercussions to the arrangement. Russia and China, as competitors to the United States, will be tempted to seek similar

Threats of foreign attack consolidate regimes' power and harden the desire for nuclear weapons.

advanced arms and does not press it to stop making nuclear weapons. At the same time, the United States does not think Pakistan is good enough to offer it the sort of nuclear cooperation Washington offers India. Yet China might think Pakistan is good enough. The United States finds the North Korean regime abhorrent for its human rights practices, but China, Russia, and perhaps other countries would rather deal with it than with the chaos that would follow its collapse.

Another problem is that good states can become bad and bad states can reform on the long road to democracy: the Shah of Iran was a friend of the United States and his nuclear plans were tolerated; then post-Shah Iran became an enemy and its nuclear ambitions intolerable. Iraq was a preferred partner over Iran during the 1980s. The Afghan mujaheddin were freedom fighters in the 1980s and terrorists in 2001. For decades, the Soviet Union was an enemy. When it dissolved, Russia in 1992 was a partner on the way to democracy. What is Russia today?

With or without regime change, universal policies are necessary because nuclear weapons and fissile materials are

To strengthen the universal rule-based system without which proliferation cannot be durably contained, the United States should:

- Reconsider ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The United States has maintained a moratorium on nuclear weapon testing since 1992 and has no plans to resume testing. In a zero-testing environment, U.S. nuclear weapon laboratories—with their unrivaled databases, budgets, and equipment—have great advantages over all others in maintaining safe and reliable weapons. Yet, the United States has not ratified the treaty. U.S. ratification of the CTBT would likely bring along China, which has not ratified it either, and the other states necessary to implement the treaty, which would strengthen deterrence of nuclear testing. With a global test ban in place, the capacity would grow to rally international pressure against any state that breaks it. Among the Thirteen Steps that the nuclear weapon states committed to in 2000 as benchmarks of their compliance with the NPT’s disarmament bargain, a test ban was listed first.
- Invest the high-level leadership needed to bring all states with nuclear weapons and fissile material stockpiles into the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, announced by the United States and Russia before the July 2006 G-8 summit. Sharing expertise, technology, and resources to secure stockpiles of materials used to make weapons is an extremely important objective, but vital details remain to be worked out. A norm must be established that all states have an obligation to implement state-of-the-art controls.
- Begin building a coalition within the governing board of the International Atomic Energy Agency to require all states to report pending imports and exports of the most sensitive nuclear technology or material on a mandatory basis. UN Security Council Resolution 1540 already legally obliges all states to “establish, develop, review and maintain appropriate effective national and trans-shipment controls” and “border controls” to prevent proliferation. But to seriously raise barriers to covert nuclear trade and to establish the basis for criminalizing it, reporting pending exports and imports of such items, which are listed in the IAEA’s Additional Protocol, should be made legally binding on all states. The aim is not to constrict trade, but rather to prohibit covertness. Providers would balk because transparency increases competition and may lower prices; prospective buyers whose peaceful intentions are in doubt will also resist transparency. Yet the results would be worth the effort.
- Begin a campaign to make nuclear proliferation an international crime. Slave-trading, piracy, and hijacking are international crimes for which people can be arrested, prosecuted, and punished anywhere in the world. Trading in nuclear weapons and related materials today is regulated only by national law, allowing proliferators to find safe havens to conduct their activities or escape punishment. Rather than negotiating a treaty, the quickest way to make proliferation an international crime would be through the UN Security Council. The logic flows naturally from the council’s enactment of Resolution 1540, which requires national legal action against proliferation. The difficulties of enforcing nonproliferation through sanctions or military force are so great that the use of legal action against individuals should be embraced as another means to prevent it. A mechanism for mandatory reporting of all sensitive nuclear transfers would create a foundation for criminalization. Compared with the illicit transfer of drugs, people, and money, enforcement of nuclear crimes is entirely feasible because the number of potential suppliers and buyers is small.

rule exemptions to help their friends and will justify their reluctance to enforce other rules, as with Iran, by arguing that the United States enforces some rules and revises others whenever it serves its interest.

If nuclear weapons are not treated as a problem per se and universal rules are not strengthened, the world could quickly face greater rather than lesser nuclear dangers. The only thing standing in the way of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey is the nuclear

Double standards and selective enforcement are corroding the nonproliferation system to the point of collapse.

Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Under the democratic bomb theory, it would be morally, politically, and strategically unobjectionable if those friendly democracies had nuclear weapons. They would not threaten the United States; they would deter or alarm North Korea and China (in Northeast Asia) or Iran and perhaps Russia (in the case of Turkey). And given the view that arms control treaties are unenforceable paper not worth relying on for international security, why should the NPT be allowed to impede the formation of friendly, democratic bulwarks around China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran?

Countries such as Egypt are already moving to take advantage of recent rule bending. On September 19, Gamal Mubarak, who appears to be seeking to succeed his father, President Hosni Mubarak, announced that Egypt might pursue an ambitious nuclear program. Long bothered by the major powers' indulgence of Israel's nuclear arsenal, and deeply upset by the nuclear program in Shiite-ruled Iran, Egypt seeks nuclear leverage, too. Egypt is not a democracy, but is it a "bad guy," in the U.S. view? As one leading Egyptian commentator put it, Egypt "is a

strategic ally of the U.S.... Why should the U.S. assist India in its nuclear program and not Egypt?"

Of course, most in the American foreign policy establishment would not endorse nuclear weapon acquisition by Japan or South Korea (even fewer would welcome Taiwan, Turkey, or Egypt into the nuclear club). But given the shift in U.S. strategy as expressed by the Bush administration first in 2002 and affirmed this year, and reflected in the administration's policies toward Iraq, Iran, Israel, and India, it is imaginable that leaders in Tokyo and Seoul would conclude that the United States would do little that was serious or lasting to stop or punish them if they hedged their nuclear bets. After all, they are friendly democracies.

Conclusions

The world would certainly be a better place if every society were represented by settled democratic governments. The prospect of perpetual peace among such states is enticing. If all were mature democracies, perhaps none would feel the need to possess nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, this remains a utopian vision. Of the approximately 100 countries that have attempted to move away from authoritarian rule in the past several decades, less than 25 percent have achieved stable, consolidated democracies. And those that have are generally among the wealthier countries with some experience of pluralism, such as in Central Europe and South America. Insofar as the leading candidates for proliferation, beyond Iran and North Korea, include countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia in which democratization is almost certain to be slow and difficult, regime change or democratization is unlikely to be a successful strategy. And in countries such as Turkey, Japan, and South Korea, which have already made transitions to democracy, the strategy is irrelevant.

The democratic world should neither disavow the spread of democracy nor abandon support of democrats struggling for reform in

authoritarian countries. The issue is the means by which democracy is promoted, and the priority and timing with which multiple interests should be pursued. Nuclear weapon proliferation and the attendant increased risk that nuclear weapons could be detonated pose the single greatest risk to U.S. and international security. Preventing the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons therefore deserves the highest priority.

The United States does not have the luxury to refuse to deal directly with the leaders who make the nuclear policy decisions it seeks to change, whether we think they are good or bad men. Nor is the United States powerful enough to prevent future nuclear proliferation without the framework of universal rules that key states are willing to enforce. Enforcement comes when rules are fair and when the rule breakers, rather than the rule makers, are seen as arrogant and reckless. A strategy of ignoring international rules to change regimes America doesn't like, and changing rules to reward those America favors, cannot succeed. ■

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