Nuclear Security: Transcending the policy objectives of the nuclear non-proliferation Regime

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I.   Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War and the strategic nuclear confrontation between the then Soviet Union and the United States, nuclear weapons seemed to have lost much of their salience in global security. As the focus shifted from a possible conflict between major powers, nuclear proliferation was identified by academics and policymakers alike as one of the principal sources of insecurity in the world (Kissinger, 2006; Anon, 2010). In the United States, the drive towards national missile defence gained traction as a result of the perception of threats from newly emerging nuclear powers with ballistic missile development programmes that would soon give them the capacity to attack the continental United States with nuclear warheads (Mistry, 2003; Cimbala, 2008). The defence policy of the Bush administration with its emphasis on being able to deter any emerging threat and a capability-based threat analysis was deeply committed to ballistic missile defence. Turning away deliberately from the strategic relationship with Russia as the defining role for US strategic nuclear forces, a new nuclear triad was conceived which included ballistic missile defense directed at small nuclear and ballistic missile powers as one of its three legs. In the absence of any new powers being able to directly threaten the United States, the justification for substantially increasing the defense budget (in contrast to the European states whose defense budgets collapsed as the external threat disappeared) was based on nebulous emerging threats until 9/11, after which any effort to limit Rumsfeld's vision of transforming the United States into a unique military power, two generations ahead of any rivals and capable of fighting two major wars at once was dead in the water. Since then the US government has made counterproliferation a major

plank of its policy. It introduced the Proliferation Security Initiative to prevent the transfer of nuclear technology from North Korea to other states, imposed sanctions on Iran and engaged in the first major war of counterproliferation against Iraq in 2003.

In the face of the centrality of the risk of nuclear proliferation to US national security policy, shared by other many other states, it is remarkable that at least on the face of it, the risk of nuclear proliferation is relatively low. 189 states are members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including five nuclear states. There are only four states that are not members of the NPT and that have nuclear weapons. Of the four states that acquired nuclear weapons outside the NPT regime, the last one to make the decision to go nuclear and that received civilian nuclear assistance started its nuclear programme 39 years ago (Pakistan – assuming that North Korea embarked on its nuclear program in 1962) (Bluth, 2008). Over the years, the NPT has become increasingly robust. In 1992, China and France finally signed up to the treaty which in 1995 was extended with indefinite duration. A significant number of countries, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Italy, Libya, Romania, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan and (the former) Yugoslavia all gave up their nuclear weapons programmes despite having started down the road of developing nuclear weapons and possessing the capability of realizing their plans (Allison, 2010, pp.74-85). Moreover, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus decided not to keep nuclear weapons on their territory, but rather agreed to give them up (Bluth, 2000), and South Africa also dismantled its nuclear weapons programme. If we define nuclear proliferation as the acquisition of fully functioning nuclear weapons capabilities (i.e. the possession of usable nuclear warheads) by countries that previously did not possess them, the empirical evidence raises the question as to whether there exists in fact such a phenomenon as nuclear proliferation at all.

Although the facts regarding the modest scale of nuclear proliferation since 1945 speak for themselves, many analysts have a more pessimistic outlook on the future of

proliferation. They note that Iran, a member of the NPT, appears to be developing a nuclear weapons capability under the guise of a civilian nuclear program and that this could spark a wave of proliferation in the Middle East (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Moreover, there has been a significant diffusion of nuclear technology by way of civil nuclear co-operation, so that the number of states that have the capabilities to embark on a weapons program, if they so chose, is now greater than ever before (Fuhrmann, 2009, pp.181-208; Brown and Chyba, 2004, pp.5-49). Finally, there is concern that the failure of the nuclear weapons states (NWS) to move towards genuine nuclear disarmament is creating cynicism about the NPT among the non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS). For these reasons Graham Allison describes the global nuclear order as "very fragile", although his paper in *Foreign Affairs* (2010) paradoxically also summarises powerful counterarguments to his own thesis (Allison 2010).

The pessimistic view according to which nuclear proliferation constitutes a major source of threat to global security and is based on several misconceptions. The first is that the international order is now much more unstable than it was during the Cold War and therefore nuclear threats are more dangerous than in the past. The second misconception is that states now have a greater incentive than ever before to acquire nuclear weapons and that therefore the global nuclear order codified by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is very fragile and in danger of imminent collapse. The third is that behaviour of potential new nuclear powers will be less predictable than that of the nuclear states that arose during the Cold War and therefore nuclear deterrence is not a strategy that can be relied upon.

The argument presented in this paper is that the non-proliferation regime is actually very robust, due to the nature of the contemporary international system and the changed role of armed conflict between states since the end of the Cold War. It posits that an exaggerated view of the threat of nuclear proliferation to global security has arisen as part of a national security narrative that paints a landscape of a multitude of emerging threats to global security

in which the proliferation of nuclear capabilities and ballistic missiles and international terrorism are central and linked elements. This narrative, which I call the "myth of nuclear proliferation", fundamentally mischaracterises the international system as unstable, replete with new and unexpected dangers (Rumsfeld, 2011; Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p.266), resulting in defence policies that are not only monumentally wasteful, but are so seriously misguided that they have deeply damaged national security. Finally, this paper argues that the assumption that nuclear proliferation in itself represents the "sum of all fears", a vital threat to international security is misguided. Without endorsing the enthusiasm for proliferation expressed by noted scholar Kenneth Waltz, it must be acknowledged that the acquisition of nuclear weapons can have a stabilising effect on conflict regions by mitigating the security concerns of the weaker parties. In other words, a more sober assessment of the likely consequences of nuclear proliferation, should it occur, is needed.

II.   The dynamics of nuclear proliferation

The academic literature has engaged in serious efforts to understand the dynamics of proliferation and develop some kind of theoretical framework, without much success. The most obvious reason for states to acquire nuclear weapons is to address the threats to their security. In terms of classical realist theory, the acquisition of nuclear weapons is a form of self-help whereby states maximize their power. According to neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer and many others, nuclear weapons enable weaker states to balance stronger states (Sagan and Waltz, 2003). They deter and prevent armed conflict and guarantee the security of the state that possesses them. Indeed Mearsheimer and Stephen van Evera confidently predicted that after the decline in Russia's military power and the rise of multipolarity in Europe various countries such as Germany, Japan and Ukraine would

become nuclear powers (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 49-51). In the words of William C. Potter of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, California:

"Taken to its logical conclusion, unadulterated neorealism predicts a lengthy nuclear proliferation chain that extends to as many states as have access to technical know-how and material to build nuclear weapons" (2008, pp.139-169, p.139).

But access to technical know-how is not in itself an indicator of the likelihood that a state will acquire nuclear weapons, nor is a lack of technical know-how an insuperable barrier to proliferation. Pakistan and North Korea both developed nuclear devices despite concerted efforts by the international community to deny them access to nuclear technology (Bluth, 2011; Khalil, 2011). The only known example of a case where denial of access to nuclear technology may have contributed to a decision to forego nuclear weapons development is that of Libya (Bowen, 2006). Indeed, access to nuclear technology for civilian purposes is one of the principal elements of the bargain embodied in the NPT. Given that all the non-nuclear weapons states have acceded to the NPT, the technical barriers to proliferation have been reduced significantly. So how can it be that so few states have acquired them? Neo-realism spectacularly fails to account for the proliferation behaviour by states (Bajema, 2010, pp. 58-79).

The most obvious alternative paradigm is neoliberal institutionalism which shares many of the assumptions of neo-realism with respect to the anarchical nature of the international system, but emphasizes the role of international institutions to alleviate the security dilemma and enable states to engage in long-term cooperation (Krasner, 1983; Reiss, 1995; Rublee, 2009; Paul, 2000). Within this framework the success of the NPT as a quasi-universal institutional framework that regulates relations between the nuclear powers and the non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) is used to account for the low level of nuclear proliferation. However, the proposition that the existence of the NPT as an international

security regime which is discriminatory in its very design and offers only very weak security assurances to its non-nuclear members has persuaded states to forego such a powerful means to provide for their security seems *prima facie* implausible. In other words, it is unclear whether the NPT is capable of having such a powerful effect as is required to explain the empirical evidence, given the fundamental assumptions of neoliberal institutionalism about the nature of the international system. This accounts for the fact that those who adhere to the neoliberal paradigm are mostly proliferation pessimists, who believe that the NPT regime is in serious danger of collapse, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

Proliferation pessimism is in part based on the existence of so-called proliferation networks that deal in dual-use goods applicable to various military technologies, including nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles (Kroenig, 2010). Most analysts consider proliferation to be demand driven, but recently Matthew Fuhrmann has used statistical analysis to support the notion that the greater diffusion of civilian nuclear technology is itself a factor that promotes proliferation (Fuhrmann, 2004, pp.181-208; Brown and Chyba, 2010, pp.5-49). In other words, greater access to civilian technology causes states to initiate nuclear weapons programs, especially if they face a serious external security threat. However, this thesis does not stand up to close scrutiny. In the first place Fuhrmann does not consider the effect of the NPT on proliferation. So far only one state (North Korea) has defected from the NPT, whereas all non-nuclear states have now joined the NPT. Given that North Korea never received nuclear assistance during the time period of his study, his data provide no evidence of how civilian nuclear collaboration affects countries that have signed up to the NPT. Secondly, this analysis involved data on nuclear cooperation agreements (NCA) from 1945-2000. It does not discriminate between NCA that were implemented and those that were not, but NCA that were not implemented could not have possibly promoted nuclear proliferation even according to his own thesis. Moreover, it does not distinguish between different

historical phases during which the positive and negative incentives in relation to the acquisition of nuclear weapons changed significantly. Looking at the larger picture, the dynamics of proliferation seems to have changed in a way contrary to Fuhrmann's thesis – as nuclear technology has become more widespread, nuclear proliferation has become less common. A closer analysis of proliferation beyond the five recognized nuclear powers shows that causation occurs in the opposite direction from that posited by Fuhrmann, namely states that have decided to acquire nuclear weapons seek nuclear cooperation agreements in order to acquire the fissile materials and technology needed for their military nuclear programs (Bluth et al., 2010, pp.184-200). In other words, access to nuclear technology itself does not drive nuclear weapons proliferation.

III.   Global Security in the Contemporary Era and the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

One of the key gaps in the efforts to develop a conceptual approach to the understanding of the dynamics of nuclear proliferation is the failure to consider the evolution of the international system and how the change in the nature of the sources of insecurity affect the decisions by states about the acquisition of nuclear arsenals (Krause, 1998). Most of the literature makes no distinction about the causes of proliferation over the entire period of the nuclear age. But the international security environment has changed substantially during in the course of 66 years. During the Cold War, both superpowers sought to prevent their allies from acquiring nuclear weapons (although this failed in the case of China, Britain and France). To some extent, the NPT was an instrument of this policy (Bluth, 1995a). In other words, we can see non-proliferation as a form of coercion, whereby non-nuclear states were compelled to forego their own nuclear capabilities in return for "extended deterrence". Particular examples where states considered acquiring a nuclear capability, but were

effectively prevented from doing so, were the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Korea (Bluth, 1995a; Oberdorfer, 2001).

The end of the Cold War was the beginning of a total transformation of the international system (Herman and Lebow, 2004; Bluth, 1995b). The military contingencies that the nuclear powers are likely to face do not involve nuclear weapons either as a deterrent or as a useful military tool. For example, in the conflicts in the Balkans four nuclear powers were engaged with armed forces, but this had no relevance for their conduct or the course of the conflict. Very few states face an external threat that would compel them to acquire nuclear weapons. Another significant factor is the development and diffusion of norms which changes the way in which countries view nuclear weapons. In particular international norms in relation to the use of force have changed fundamentally. It is no longer considered legitimate to use force to support national interests (including the resolution of territorial disputes). Rather, the use of force is only permissible under very specific conditions, such as self-defence, or the enforcement of international law and security as mandated by the UN Security Council (which may include humanitarian intervention) (Chesterman, 2001; Roberts, 1996). Moreover, the use of force is subject to very stringent conditions, among which proportionality and the avoidance of civilian casualties are paramount. While the possession of nuclear weapons is not against international law *per se* (although contrary to a treaty commitment for NNWS in the NPT), their use would be illegal in almost all conceivable circumstances. Indeed, Nina Tannenwald has demonstrated the emergence of a "nuclear taboo", a growing and powerful moral restraint on the use of nuclear weapons that has turned "the habit of non-use" into a form of required and expected behaviour among states (2007). Although one may question how strictly international norms are being adhered to, they demonstrably restrain the use of force by states. Many former practices in the conduct of warfare are no longer acceptable, such as the kind of strategic bombing practiced

during World War II, the annexation of foreign territories or the execution of prisoners of war. Even the kind of planning for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe during the Cold War now looks bizarre and beyond all moral bounds (Bluth, 1995a).

It has to be said that the recent Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea is viewed by some scholars as the beginning of a revival of the nuclear threat in global security as Russia has hinted that the in the event of NATO military intervention the use of tactical nuclear weapons might be possible. This is underscored by the risks taken by Russia in its "hybrid warfare" to support its sphere of influence despite its relative weakness in conventional capabilities vis-à-vis NATO (Sinovets, 2015). How significant the nuclear threat is remains to be seen however given that NATO also has nuclear capabilities and the US has strategic nuclear capabilities that are more than a match for those of Russia. So far a revival of the military confrontation in Europe or the strategic nuclear stand-off between the US and Russia is not on the horizon. Moreover, this situation has not significantly affected the pattern of global security.

Clearly the major risk to international security in the time following the post-Cold war period resides in the so-called new wars, sub-state conflicts that arise from ethnic disputes, or failed states in regions of low development (Kaldor, 2007). For the vast majority of states, there is no significant risk of war. This is a fundamental reason why the nuclear non-proliferation regime is robust.

There is a substantial recent body of literature which argues that major war is becoming obsolete as an instrument of foreign policy or as an activity of states. The most highly developed version of this thesis has been presented Steven Pinker who has sought to demonstrate, using a wealth of historical and contemporary statistical analyses, that not only interstate war, but all forms of violence (including homicide and other forms of criminal behaviour) have undergone a systemic, worldwide decline as cultural norms have changed.

Pinker (2011), Joshua Goldstein (2011) and Christopher Fettweis (2011) also demonstrate the dramatic decline in interstate warfare (to the point where this phenomenon has become exceedingly rare) and the precipitous decline in worldwide casualties of war and terrorism since the end of World War II (Lebow, 2010). The work of Michael Mandelbaum, John Mueller and Christopher Fettweis is based on the observation that the costs of war have dramatically increased while its benefits have become marginal (Mueller, 1989; Mandelbaum, 1998, pp.20-38). The sources of wealth for knowledge-based economies in a world of global trade are no longer to be found in armed conquest. In the past, at the end of the 19th century, war was considered a normal, legitimate and necessary activity of states. But the norms governing international relations have changed. Now the use of force is no longer considered acceptable except under very exceptional and restricted circumstances, and war is considered to be akin to a form of criminal activity.

One significant factor in the diffusion of international norms has been the scale of democratization since the end of the Cold War, since the adoption of such norms is one of the key elements of the construction of a liberal democracy. The impact of democratization on the decline of armed conflict between states has been articulated as the 'democratic peace thesis. This is based on the power of the normative constraints on modern states with regard to the use of force against another state (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p.210-11) Even if there are exceptions to the 'democratic peace thesis' (depending on the definition of democracy, and the historical period under review) (Reiter and Stam, 2000; Filson and Werner, 2004, pp. 296–313), nevertheless there is the empirical observation that 21st century liberal democratic states do not fear military attacks by other such states, do not develop armed forces with the purpose of using them against them and resolve their disputes in other ways than the use or the threat of force. Not only can it be said that liberal democracies do not tend to go to war with each other, but they are not perceived to threaten one another and the balance of power between liberal

democracies has been relevant only in the context of responses to other external threats (Latham, 1993, pp.139-164; Schweller, 1992, pp.235-269; Mearsheimer, 1990, pp.49-51; Mintz Geva, 1993, pp.484-503; Maoz and Russett, 1992, pp.245-267). Although the common external threat and the conscious endeavour to overcome the national enmities in Europe which have resulted in two world wars were undoubtedly important factors, a deeper structural principle seems to be necessary to account for this difference in the role of military force.

The work of Bruce Russett, William Antolis, Carol Ember, Melvin Ember and Zeev Maoz (1992) has shown that there is a strong correlation between the degree of political participation and normative constraints and the frequency of highly militarised disputes. They demonstrated that normative constraints had a substantially more significant effect that institutionalisation (Russett, 1993). This is a truly remarkable phenomenon. If there really is a class of states now that will not go to war with each other, this would mean that many of the assumptions about international relations current in the academic community would have to abandoned.

Even many states that are not full-blown liberal democracies nevertheless adhere to the norms governing relations between states and are not posing a threat to other states. Another way of expressing the results by Russett and others is that the likelihood of conflict is primarily a function of the normative asymmetries between states. The degree of normative asymmetry is particularly high with states that have become known as 'rogue states'. A 'rogue state' is one that does not adhere to international law, behaves aggressively and engages in substantial human rights violations against its own population. The aggressive behaviour includes threats or even attacks on other states, state sponsored terrorism and the development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Iraq under Saddam Hussein was the ideal type of a rogue state (Bluth, 2004, pp.851-872). Most states nowadays consider the

use of force against other states illegitimate except under very specific conditions. The likelihood of armed conflict between states in the contemporary era is low.

IV.   'Rogue states' and International Terrorists

At the centre of the contemporary narrative of US national security, the combination of "rogue states", nuclear proliferation, ballistic missile proliferation and international terrorism creates a serious threat to the United States that cannot be addressed with traditional means of containment and deterrence, but requires instead a combination of ballistic missile defence and a proactive defence strategy that includes pre-emptive strikes to deal with threats before they have fully formed (Rumsfeld, 2011; Wirls, 2010). (It also assumes that emerging ballistic missile powers can deploy ICBMs, but not in numbers that will saturate US defensive capabilities).

This is a state-centric view of international security that was not weakened, but rather reinforced by the events of 9-11 (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003; Woodward, 2002). The Bush doctrine firmly linked the threat of international terrorists with the states that harboured them. This manifested itself in the unwavering conviction that there was a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda and what Peter Bergen has referred to as the "unified field theory of terrorism" (Bergen, 2011, p.137). The threat that Iraq might pass WMD to terrorists became a major reason for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Bush administration became obsessed with the Iraqi nuclear threat in particular. As President Bush put it: 'We cannot wait for the final proof, the smoking gun, that comes in the form of a mushroom cloud' (Bush, 2011). A similar statement was made by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.   Vice-President Cheney sifted the raw intelligence and seemed to find evidence of active progress in Iraq's nuclear program that had previously been dismantled by UNSCOM after the Gulf War. Bush, Cheney and their

colleagues issued statements to the effect that if Iraq could obtain enough fissile material it could build a nuclear weapon within a year. The Iraq War is a paradigmatic example of the consequences of exaggerating the threat of proliferation. All of the elements of this threat analysis proved to be false. Iraq did not have nuclear weapons or a programme of development that was going to provide a nuclear capability in the medium term. There was no collusion between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. There was no "axis of evil" linking Iraq to Iran or North Korea and international terrorist networks (Chinoy, 2008, p.6). There was no imminent or even long-term threat to the homeland. In terms of the threat to the security of the United States, containment and deterrence was a viable option.

The phenomenon of "rogue states" is by no means new or unprecedented. The very term signifies the fact that most states in the international community are not "rogue". To reject international norms with respect to the use of force has become very much the exception rather than the rule. This was not the case during much of the Cold War period. Indeed the Soviet Union and Mao's People's Republic of China were "rogue states" that were far more dangerous and aggressive than the current list of usual suspects, at least for a time (Gavin, 2009/10, pp.7-37). Stalin's and Mao's totalitarian rule resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of their own citizens and they spread their terror to other countries. Their ambitions to destroy and supplant the capitalist world, their support for guerrillas and terrorists world-wide, and the size of the nuclear arsenals that they acquired and deployed, created a truly global threat that confronted the human race with the prospect of annihilation (Kissinger, 2011). Those who now nostalgically look back to the Cold War period forget how dangerous this global confrontation really was (Bluth, 2001, pp.101-110). The number of contemporary "rogue states" is actually quite small, their military capabilities are limited and will remain so for the foreseeable future. They have no capacity to strike the homeland of the United States and their regional ambitions can be contained through alliances and extended deterrence.

Only one of them has nuclear devices (North Korea) and one other (Iran) may acquire them in future, although it remains uncertain whether Teheran will take final step to assemble weapons and leave the NPT. Various scholars, commentators and politicians assert the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would constitute such a dangerous threat to international security that almost any means would be legitimate to avert such a development, regardless of the consequences (Kroenig, 2012). This line of argument constitutes the "fallacy of the absolute threat". The threat is articulated in such a way so as to negate all conventional means (such as diplomacy and deterrence) to mitigate it, only to discover that other options (improved military capabilities, resort to military threat or actions) are either ineffective, impractical or politically unacceptable. Historically nuclear weapons have been political weapons that are believed to accord status, geopolitical influence and deterrence against external aggression (Freedman, 2003). If nuclear weapons are actually used, all of these benefits disappear and given the existence of adversaries with an superfluity of nuclear capabilities, and with the disappearance of all restraints against the use of force such a reckless course of action would almost certainly result in the end of the regime, if not the total destruction of the country. For this reason it is wholly implausible that Iran would transfer nuclear weapons to other parties and allow them to control how and when nuclear weapons might be used. It is not at all clear whether the possession of nuclear weapons will make Iran more aggressive and dangerous. A likely consequence is that other states in the region will seek to balance Iran by closer cooperation with the United States and reliance on extended deterrence. This means that Teheran's political options will narrow and it will have to act with greater restraint. In any case, even though most experts agree that it is not desirable that Iran should have nuclear weapons, it is not clear that such a development would create an unmanageable threat for the region or the United States. One consequence of a nuclear-armed Iran might be that the United States might be more constrained in terms of its

military options in the region. But the fact is that the United States is already severely constrained (to some extent as a result of the Iraq War) and has not responded with the use of force to very severe provocations on the part of Iran, so it is hard to see how this situation will change if Iran goes nuclear. There is no reason to believe that Iran cannot be effectively deterred from using nuclear weapons, given the global conventional and nuclear power projection capabilities the United States already possesses. For example, North Korea's transition to overt nuclear status did not result in any significant changes in the US force posture in Northeast Asia.

International terrorism is clearly a significant threat to international security. In terms of state-sponsored terrorism, it is mostly a regional threat in the Middle East. There remains a risk of attacks on the US homeland and Europe as *jihadist* networks continue to harbour ambitions to mount such operations. The emergence of ISIS has exacerbated the threat. But this threat has to be seen in its proper perspective. The defensive measures that have been put in place to prevent major terrorist attacks have been mostly successful. In the United Kingdom, of the 20 odd major terrorist plots which resulted in major arrests since 2001, only three came to some level of fruition and only one resulted in the deaths of people other than the terrorists themselves (MI5, n.d.). International terrorists do not have the capacity to destroy a country, or even to destroy a city, and they have little chance of achieving their political objectives. At best they can achieve minor disruptions, which are tragic for the people who suffer, but from the long experience of terrorist threats that Western states have face it is clear that they are not a significant threat to resilient liberal democracies. As for the possibility of terrorists to acquire nuclear weapons, this still remains a purely hypothetical risk. As Peter Bergen has demonstrated, Al Qaeda's efforts in this regard were rather amateurish and fanciful. The historical experience shows that constructing a nuclear device is very hard even for states that can devote massive resources to the problem (e.g. Libya) and

put in place a major infrastructure for such a purpose. The only realistic prospect for terrorists to acquire nuclear devices would be from a state (Frost, 2005). The only "rogue" state that currently has nuclear devices is North Korea and it has no connection to Islamic terrorist networks nor is there any reason to believe that Pyongyang will give nuclear devices to terrorists, despite its nuclear collaboration with other states such as Syria and Pakistan. Iran does not yet have a nuclear weapons capability, but there is no reason to believe that it would risk giving nuclear devices to third parties whose actions it would be unable to control, especially given the scale of US and Israeli nuclear capabilities. In any event, the Iran nuclear deal now has forestalled the emergence of Iran as a nuclear weapons power for the medium term at least.

V.   Confronting nuclear proliferation: The case of North Korea

The most recent case in which a state "went nuclear" is that of North Korea. It is a good case study for the central argument of this paper, especially since very strenuous efforts were made to prevent and then to reverse the DPRK's acquisition of nuclear capabilities. North Korea is one of the so-called "rogue states" and was identified by George W. Bush as a member of the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address. While the threat from North Korea has become a standard part of political discourse, the articulation of the nature of this threat is surprisingly vague (Bluth, 2011).

A realistic threat assessment needs to be based on an analysis of the basic security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula and what we can discern about the intentions of the North Korean leadership. These issues are contested and subject to some degree of uncertainty. The total concentration of economic resources on the military and the enormous build-up of forces at the DMZ by North Korea went clearly beyond the needs for defence from a possible attack by US and South Korean forces; it was designed to support a strategy of unification on

Pyongyang's terms if the situation was right. Although in the first two decades after the Korean War the conventional forces of the North posed a serious threat by sheer weight of numbers and were superior to the forces of South Korea, the alliance with the United States, which was supported by the presence of US forces with nuclear weapons deterred a full-scale attack.

As South Korea fast developed its economy while the economy of North Korea stagnated and then went into precipitous decline, the military balance changed as North Korea had to make do with old and obsolescent military equipment based on Soviet technology, whereas the South acquired more and more state-of-the-art US military equipment. Nowadays South Korea would most likely win a (non-nuclear) war with the North, even without direct US involvement, although US forces are still in Korea and committed to be engaged if South Korea came under attack. While North Korea could not win a war with the South, and its regime would not survive such a war, it could nevertheless inflict unacceptable damage on the South due to the large number of artillery pieces that can target the capital Seoul and its longer-range missiles that can target any point on the peninsula. North Korea can also target US forces in Japan with some of its missiles (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004; O'Hanlon and Mochizuki, 2003).

There is no doubt therefore that North Korea has a robust deterrent capability that means that the United States has no plausible military option, nor would South Korean governments want to risk any war on the peninsula. As far as North Korea's unconventional arsenal is concerned, it is militarily less significant than is sometimes supposed. The chemical weapons significantly enhance North Korea's capacity to cause civilian casualties in the South, but do not necessarily redress the military balance as South Korean and American forces are equipped and trained to operate in a contaminated environment. Increasingly North Korean missiles can target US forces in Japan or Japan itself. The analysis of the military

balance shows that the strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula can be best characterized as a stable deterrence relationship (Cha and Kang, 2003). Nevertheless, there are significant dangers (Kim, 2003). North Korea's threat to international security comes in two ways. The first is the threat of proliferation. As a major source of ballistic missile technology for Iran and Pakistan, North Korea has provided potential nuclear delivery vehicles to states in crisis regions, a development that significantly affects the interests of the United States, although again it does not result in a military threat to the US homeland.

From the American perspective, the acquisition of long-range ballistic missiles by anti-Western states such as Iran and Syria has been one of the major emerging threats to international security, although again the threat is purely identified in terms of capability, without any attempt to analyse the effect on either US interests or the security of the US homeland. The collapse of the Syrian state has replaced this threat with other more diffuse threats and Iran has now agreed to a deal to restrain its nuclear activities. Pyongyang has hinted that it might engage in the proliferation of nuclear weapons materials and technology, and has been known to provide nuclear technology to Syria and Myanmar. This threat of proliferation will persist as long as North Korea has non-conventional weapons programmes, and it has given rise to the Proliferation Security Initiative designed to inhibit the proliferation of missiles and nuclear materials (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007). The second is the longer-term threat of North Korea's emerging capabilities. North Korea has not yet demonstrated that it can mount nuclear warheads on long-range missiles. However, in the medium term such a strategic threat to the continental United States could emerge. This would, from the US perspective, potentially transform the strategic situation (Kim, 2004).

At the core the reason why North Korea represents a threat to international security is that its military capabilities constitutes the main leverage it perceives it has with regard to the

international community and United States in particular. The end of the superpower conflict and the dramatic shift in the correlation of forces between the two Koreas has altered threat perceptions North and South. Northern leaders articulate the threat as emanating from the 'hostile attitude' of the United States. This threat has a political and a military component. The political component consists in the rejection of the legitimacy of North Korea, the unwillingness of the United States to open diplomatic relations with North Korea and the various indications that Washington would like to see a regime change in North Korea (Paik, 2005; Jung, 2005, pp 63-86). Some of the language used by the Bush Administration, such as including North Korea in the 'axis of evil' and Bush's personal dislike of Kim Jong-il, the attacks on North Korea's human rights records and its missile exports, the maintenance of sanctions are all part of this image of an implacably hostile United States that might seek any opportunity to attack it. The Bush national security doctrine with its emphasis on pre-emptive attack added to this perception. The military component consists of the presence of US forces in South Korea and Japan as well as the global military power projection capabilities, which include tactical and strategic nuclear weapons.

A strategic analysis of the situation on the Korean peninsula shows quite clearly that North Korea the nuclear programme is a central part of a survival strategy for a regime that is in a state of permanent crisis. The strategic situation on the Korean peninsula is stable, although the risk of inadvertent escalation of conflict does exist, especially as the regime may eventually collapse. The most significant threat to stability is the crisis of the regime, rather than its seemingly threatening behaviour which is designed to create a more favourable domestic and external environment.

The North Korean case illustrates a number of principles. First of all North Korea is an isolated country, with no real stake in the international system. The attempts to use international law, relying on the mechanisms of the IAEA given that North Korea had

acceded to the NPT, proved ineffective in halting the nuclear programme, both because the North Korean leaders had no compunction to ignore international norms and had scant regard for the effect on international opinion. Likewise the imposition of sanctions on a regime that already has minimal economic links with the international community had little impact. Military options to force an end to the nuclear programme were also not available. Secondly, North Korea feels under imminent threat from the United States and South Korea. The nuclear program was seen as an instrument to deal both with the external threat and the problem of internal lack of legitimacy. This combination of factors is exceedingly rare. The vast majority of states has internalised international norms to a significant degree, has much to lose by the imposition of sanctions, and does not face an external security threat. Finally, North Korea is clearly deterred from launching a major war. Containment and deterrence therefore are suitable strategies to deal with the North Korean nuclear threat for as long as it persists.

VI.   Reconsidering the risk of proliferation

A critical approach to the pessimistic view of nuclear proliferation is not to deny that nuclear proliferation has occurred, or to claim that there is no risk that further nuclear proliferation may occur in the future. It is rather to identify a narrative about the risks of proliferation of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery that has served as the basis for a conceptualization of international security that is not warranted by the facts and that is based on an unrealistic assessment of risk. Put more simply, nuclear proliferation has been characterised as a threat to international security that is highly exaggerated. This in turn has resulted in national security policies that are inappropriate and out of proportion with respect to the actual sources of global insecurity. This has given rise to one major war involving

hundreds of thousands of casualties, and the potential of further military action in at least two theaters persists.

The reification of the threat of nuclear proliferation sustains the conviction that the United States is facing a mortal danger from its enemies abroad which must be urgently addressed. It is so central to the conservative ideology that it is simply inconceivable to its adherents that it might not be true, but it is shared by many across the political spectrum. During the Cold War period, it resulted in absurd statements by leaders such as Reagan and his Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger that the Soviet Union was outgunning the United States quantitatively and qualitatively at every level. This way of thinking expressed itself in the notions of the "window of vulnerability" based on the belief that the Soviet leaders were planning for the moment when they could destroy all land-based US strategic nuclear forces with a first strike (ignoring the 42% of the strategic arsenal based at sea) and "dictate terms" to the United States. After the Cold War, the alleged threat of nuclear proliferation gave rise to the "axis of evil" and justified rising defence expenditures and a commitment to the development and deployment of ballistic missile defence. Unlike the Cold War myths of a Soviet first strike and Soviet strategic superiority, the nuclear proliferation myth also has significant adherents among liberals, especially in the nuclear expert community in which there is widespread support for a pessimistic view of proliferation and the risk it poses to international security. Indeed, the Obama administration has only moderately changed the national security narrative, by emphasizing the importance of "soft power" and diplomacy and replacing the concept of "war on terror" with "regional conflict".

However, as the preceding sections have demonstrated, none of the central elements of this narrative stand up to scrutiny. In fact, the global international security environment is more benign than it has ever been, as the risk of inter-state conflict has practically disappeared for most countries. The United States in particular is secure from external attack

and there is no other country that can challenge the United States with either conventional or nuclear forces. Indeed, it could be argued that the "myth of nuclear proliferation" is more dangerous than the phenomenon of nuclear proliferation itself. It has already resulted in one major war with casualties in excess of 100,000, and there is the potential for further military conflict in two other theatres of war.

Conclusion

The failure of large-scale nuclear proliferation to materialize since 1945 has created a conundrum for scholars seeking to explain the dynamics of proliferation. The neo-realist paradigm has proven inadequate as scholars realized that security and the maximisation of power were not reliable indicators of the motivation to acquire nuclear arsenals. Subsequent work invoked cultural factors, the formation of state identity and institutionalism to explain proliferation or restraint (Solingen, 2007). More recently it has become fashionable to focus on domestic political factors and use process tracing to account for the nuclear policies of states. Even psychological profiles of leaders have been invoked to explain the acquisition of nuclear arsenals (Hymans, 2006). While much of this work has merit, it by-passes the central issue: why is proliferation is so rare? When 184 states behave in a like manner, it is more plausible that systemic factors, rather than the domestic politics of individual states or the psychology of their leaders are more important in explaining this phenomenon. Most of the literature also does not distinguish clearly between the proliferation pressures during the Cold War period and those in the contemporary international system. However, during the strategic nuclear confrontation of the Cold War, proliferation pressures were much more significant than they are today. They were to some extent contained by coercion and reassurance within the central alliances of the bipolar system, but threatened to break out at the periphery. The transformation of the international system since then has been characterised by increased

democratization, the development and diffusion of international norms and the steep decline in armed conflicts between states. The result has been that nuclear weapons have become an increasingly irrelevant factor in international security.

The risk of nuclear proliferation is very limited and confined to a very small number of states of concern. More importantly, proliferation does not constitute an existential threat to the United States, or the West more generally. The military capabilities of potential new nuclear powers are dwarfed by those of the US, and whatever one may say about their leadership, there is no evidence that they are prepared to risk a full-scale military response from the United States which would be the result of an attack on the US homeland. This is not an argument to ignore nuclear proliferation, or to weaken the mechanisms provided through the NPT, the IAEA and other elements of controlling the supply of nuclear materials and dual-use technology, but rather to put the issue of nuclear proliferation into is proper perspective in terms of strategic analysis. Traditional instruments of deterrence can be effective to contain the threat. This also applies to the threats of "hybrid warfare" that emerged in Eastern Europe in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. At the same time a combination of measures to constrict the trade in nuclear technology and materials, extended deterrence by the United States and imposing a very high cost for defying the international community and becoming a nuclear weapons state will discourage the vast majority of states. Rather than engaging in large-scale high risk military interventions such as the Iraq War of 2003, illicit programs of WMD can be dealt with appropriate political instruments in order to maintain a stable international order in the so-called "second nuclear age".

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