Nuclear Weapons Nonproliferation

THE UNITED STATES IS CONSIDERING THE DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT OF new nuclear weapon designs, the objective being to sustain the nation’s ultimate deterrent for the foreseeable future. These initiatives are presented as supporting the highest U.S. security priorities, which include countering the threats of terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons—priorities that are widely shared internationally.

Proponents argue that the United States discussing, let alone deploying, new weapon designs has no significant impact on proliferation. Officials responsible for the U.S. nuclear weapons enterprise have made this point by considering the impact on three groups internationally: existing nuclear powers, rogue states, and terrorists. According to this characterization, rogue states and terrorists pursue their own interests, disregarding international influence to the degree they can. And the balance of power remains essentially unchanged among existing nuclear powers. As a senior Chinese colleague put it, our nations remain effectively deterred whether or not the United States introduces new weapons into its nuclear arsenal.

But the proponents’ argument is flawed because it ignores the vast majority of nations around the world: nonnuclear powers that do conform to international norms. To the degree that it considers deploying new weapons, many of these countries view the United States as remaining aloof from its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Indeed, many of the acknowledged nuclear powers also express grave concerns that the United States’ statements and actions may erode the nonproliferation regime by influencing the nonnuclear nations.

Of course, we cannot be certain how deploying new warhead types will affect the nonproliferation regime; after all, science provides only part of the expertise required to inform policy, so this issue has to be approached with humility and care. But countering the proliferation of nuclear weapons remains one of our highest priorities, and there is the real potential of undermining that goal. Simply stating, without evidence, that U.S. actions have no significant impact on proliferation amounts to ignoring the issue.

This is especially the case given that the United States has exceptional technical talent in areas relevant to nonproliferation. The national laboratories have vast expertise in assessing nuclear programs of all kinds; in tracking nuclear materials and supporting their protection, control, and accounting; and in applying nuclear forensics. They provide training for international inspectors, participating in inspections as appropriate, and maintain collaborations with counterparts worldwide. Moreover, they have the analytic tools of the scientific method and can evaluate competing hypotheses about what does or does not contribute to enhanced proliferation. Yet rather than benefiting from this national capability, their expertise remains essentially untapped as different options for U.S. policy are assessed. This is an unnecessary oversight and a missed opportunity. The existing national capabilities should be explicitly charged to evaluate the international impacts of different nuclear weapons options being considered.

It is all the more urgent that we do better as technical developments heighten, rather than diminish, the prospects for nuclear weapons proliferation. The knowledge, people, and materials associated with nuclear programs are spreading relentlessly. Indeed, a central reason why nonproliferation is among the highest security priorities for many countries is that there is already an enormous source of materials and expertise that can contribute to proliferation. Moreover, the community of latent nuclear states has greatly expanded over the years and will continue to do so.

It is therefore urgent that we collectively focus on the most effective means to counter the proliferation of nuclear weapons, including fully using the United States’ relevant technical capabilities. Doing so will call more for intelligence and law enforcement—that is, for cooperative measures—than for traditional deterrence or military coercion. Partnering with nations around the world currently offers the most promising approach to the growing threat of nuclear arms.

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