



Policy Forum 98-05: Implications of South Asian Nuclear Tests: The Proliferation Network



The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 98-05: Implications of South Asian Nuclear Tests: The Proliferation Network", NAPSNet Policy Forum, May 21, 1998, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/napsnet-forum-17-the-implications-of-indias-nuclear-tests/>

NAPSNet Forum #17 -- The Implications of India's Nuclear Tests

NAPSNet Forum #17 -- The Implications of India's Nuclear Tests

Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

THE IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR TESTS

#17A -- May 21, 1998

The is intended to provide expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia, and an opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis. The Forum is open to all participants of the [Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network \(NAPSNet\)](#) . As always, NAPSNet invites your responses to this report. Please see "[NAPSNet Invites Your Responses,](#)" below, and send your responses to the NAPSNet Coordinator at: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org .

This is the first of a series of essays that make up Policy Forum #17.

Essay #2: [What Can the World Do? by Ramesh Thakur.](#)

THE PROLIFERATION NETWORK

Essay by Wade Huntley

Copyright (c) 1998 Nautilus of America/The Nautilus Institute

CONTENTS:

Contents of This Report:

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Wade Huntley](#)

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Proliferation Problems](#)
- [3. Proliferation Linkages](#)
- [4. The Proliferation Network](#)
- [5. Toward a New Nonproliferation Strategy](#)
- [6. Conclusion](#)

[III. NAPSNet Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

This essay was written by [Wade Huntley](#), Ph.D., the Program Director for Asia/Pacific Security at the Nautilus Institute. Dr. Huntley examines the connections between the recent nuclear tests conducted by India and the DPRK's threats to restart its Yongbyon nuclear reactor. He argues that US nonproliferation policies need to be updated to take into account the new realities of proliferation in the post-Cold War era. In addition to responding to horizontal proliferation threats, the US needs to step up efforts to achieve vertical disarmament, while at the same time devising complex engagement strategies to balance negative threats with positive inducements for nonproliferation. Ultimately, Dr. Huntley concludes that promoting nonproliferation requires finding solutions to the outstanding political issues which drive countries to seek a nuclear option.

II. Essay by Wade Huntley

1. Introduction

Two important sets of recent events in Asia present ominous portents for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region. The first set of events was India's five nuclear tests, accompanied by its declared intention to now become a full-fledged nuclear-armed state, eliciting alarm throughout the world community. The second set of events, less widely noticed, was North Korea's announced threats to reopen its Yongbyon nuclear power reactor and to halt the canning of spent fuel rods previously removed from the reactor, and thus to effectively "suspend" its 1994 accord with the United States under which it forsook its own incipient nuclear weapons program.

At first glance, these two sets of events appear related mainly by the heightened concern for

stability and peace in Asia each has generated. However, certain more tangible links also exist. These crucial but less recognized links hint at the intricate and reinforcing relationships growing ever more numerous among proliferation aspirants. This emerging *proliferation network* greatly complicates the task of curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, demanding new strategies on the parts of those governments and organizations working to achieve nonproliferation goals.

2. Proliferation Problems

India's tests and policy declarations have raised the specter of a spiraling nuclear arms race in South Asia. The reaction of the world's leading powers to India's actions, tepid at best by Pakistan's standards, has done little to stave off the immediate prospect of Pakistan conducting one or more retaliatory nuclear tests. Accelerated development by both countries of sophisticated medium-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile systems now also looms.

Several factors suggest that a nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan is unlikely to be as stable or enduring as that between the United States and the Soviet Union proved to be. First, these countries' history of war and crisis, and their contemporary grievances, suggest a relatively greater prospect for future conflicts in which deliberate nuclear attack might be contemplated. Neither country is a "status quo" state for whom deterring attack is a sufficient end. The ardent cultural and religious dimension of their relationship additionally portends that crises could release deep animosities overwhelming the kind of sober rationality that theories of mutual deterrence premise. Second, the countries' territorial proximity will shorten reaction times in crisis decision-making and hence increase the dangers of inadvertent nuclear war. The United States and the Soviet Union, at a similarly early stage in their nuclear rivalry, could deliver nuclear weapons only by aircraft and hence had hours of warning time of an attack. Subsequent deployment of land-based ballistic missiles reduced this margin to thirty minutes, and deployment of submarine-based missiles reduced it to ten minutes; however, by then the Cold War rivals had many years' experience acting to stabilize their nuclear relationship. By contrast, India and Pakistan would traverse from latent nuclear ability to overt nuclear rivalry by deploying nuclear-armed ballistic missiles with flight times as short as three minutes. This circumstance would create strong temptations for pre-emptive strikes and "launch-on-warning" strategies, placing tremendous time-critical pressures on decision-makers and command and control systems with past histories of incoherence and no experience in explicit nuclear contexts.

A nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan is also especially worrisome due to its potential to cause spiraling repercussions outside the South Asia region. Many countries in Asia and elsewhere in the world will be watching the disposition of events with keen interest. The most pressing and perhaps most important question will be the reaction of China, which has already played an instrumental role in assisting Pakistan's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile development. In the wake of India's nuclear test, China might now consider providing security guarantees to Pakistan, involving itself more directly than ever before in South Asian affairs even if falling short of extending its nuclear deterrent to another country for the first time. In response, and/or to maintain its missile superiority over Pakistan, India could complete development of its Agni missiles. These missiles, previously tested successfully on three occasions, have an estimated range of up to 2500 kilometers that would bring important Chinese cities and industrial areas within reach. Such actions could in turn prompt accelerated Chinese nuclear arms deployments and reinforce Chinese reluctance to enter into strategic arms negotiations, developments that neither Russia nor the United States would welcome.

If North Korea were in fact to renege on its commitment to freeze and dismantle its Yongbyon nuclear power reactor and to can and export the reactor's 8000 spent fuel rods, these actions would serve to undermine key elements of the 1994 "Agreed Framework." Under that accord, the United States agreed in exchange to construct two new light-water nuclear reactors and to provide interim deliveries of fuel oil to help stave off North Korea's desperate energy shortages. The North Korean government's stated reason for threatening these actions has been dissatisfaction with fuel oil delivery and nuclear plant construction delays, for which it holds the United States responsible. In addition, North Korean officials charge that the United States, by maintaining its economic sanctions against North Korea, is crippling the North Korean economy and reneging on its commitment in the Agreed Framework to normalize economic relations. In the words of the North Korean Foreign Minister, "We are keeping up our progress in implementing the nuclear freeze agreement, but the U.S. is behind. So we have now decided to slow down and suspend certain aspects of the agreement."

The United States disputes the charge that the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the US-backed consortium implementing the Agreed Framework, has not met its obligations. Although by month's end the US will have delivered to North Korea this year only 130,000 of the 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel oil promised annually, US officials point out that the United States has never failed to fulfill its delivery commitments. And, although the light-water reactor plant construction is already a year behind schedule and does not yet have complete funding, US officials assert that the United States has made the "best efforts" called for in the agreement and that North Korea is itself responsible for many of the delays.

Nevertheless, fresh news in recent weeks of the continuing difficulties KEDO faces in financing both the oil deliveries and the plant construction project may well have helped precipitate the North Korean threats to abandon the Agreed Framework. Regardless of whether or not North Korea will (or even can) follow through with its threats, its expressed dissatisfaction, in conjunction with breakdowns in the four-party peace talks and the repatriation of MIA remains, reveal a serious erosion in the political relationship that the Agreed Framework was intended to foster. Such an erosion has, and will continue to have, dire consequences to US nonproliferation goals far beyond the prospect of North Korea restarting its own nuclear weapons program.

3. Proliferation Linkages

The Indian tests and North Korean threats, each taken on their own, give sufficient cause for concern for the erosion of principles and practices of nonproliferation in the region. However, crucial linkages between these two sets of events add a new and perhaps even more troubling dimension to the problem of sustaining nonproliferation.

The most direct and material linkage between the Indian and North Korean actions stems from the role that North Korea has played in helping facilitate the missile proliferation in South Asia that forms the context of the current crisis. India's nuclear tests came just five weeks after Pakistan successfully test-fired its new "Ghauri" missile. This nuclear-capable missile, with an estimated range of up to 1500 kilometers and an estimated payload capacity of up to 700 kilograms, provides Pakistan with potential nuclear threat against most major Indian cities. It is now known that the Ghauri was developed from North Korea "Nodong" missiles, sold in complete form to Pakistan last year even though they have yet to be provided to North Korea's own military. In this way, North Korea contributed directly to the accelerating missile technology race in South Asia that created the context, or at least the pretext, for India's nuclear tests.

This missile sale advances a North Korea-Pakistan relationship dating back to the 1970s and firmly established in the 1980s when the two countries cooperated in providing military assistance to Iran during its eight-year war with Iraq. Growing cooperation between the two countries eventually involved North Korean acquisition of nuclear technology from Pakistan as well as ballistic missile technology exchange. Pakistani officials reportedly made visits to North Korea to observe Nodong missile development in 1992 and 1993, and the Ghauri program itself reportedly dates to the December 1993 visit to China and North Korea by Benazir Bhutto, then Pakistan's prime minister. China is believed to have facilitated and assisted North Korean missile technology transfers to Pakistan, satisfying its desire to see Pakistan receive such technology while avoiding the kind of direct transfer that would threaten its relationship with the United States and other Asian countries. The subsequent North Korea-Pakistan cooperation in development of the Ghauri missile is also believed to have directly benefited North Korea's own cash-strapped missile programs, in part from data provided in the April 6 test firing of the Ghauri, which flew further than any previously tested North Korean missile.

North Korean missile assistance to Pakistan represents an important failure of the US diplomatic effort toward North Korea of which the Agreed Framework is but one part. The United States has in recent years invested significant effort in seeking to gain agreement from North Korea to curb its missile technology proliferation. Yet, meetings between the two countries to discuss missile proliferation have been characterized mostly by lack of progress and frequent breakdowns. Meanwhile, North Korea managed to conduct its sale of missiles to Pakistan without obstruction -- US officials concede that the United States was unaware of the transaction until it was completed.

More importantly, the missile sale also signifies a failure of US nonproliferation diplomacy in the region more generally. In addition to the missiles from North Korea, Pakistan also obtained from China crucial technology to support its nuclear program as well as complete "M-11" nuclear-capable missiles. Although with a range of only about 280 kilometers these missiles do not enable Pakistan to strike major Indian cities, China also more recently supplied plans and equipment to enable Pakistan to construct a factory for indigenous production of the missile. India, for its part, has used Canadian-made nuclear reactors to produce plutonium for its weapons program and acquired technological information for its missile development program from both Russia and the United States. Such transfers, and many others like them either feared or known, evince the emerging proliferation linkages that offer a new obstacle to nonproliferation goals.

In addition to the material links, the Indian and North Korean actions were also linked in a more political sense. Neither country disregarded the likely international reactions to their actions. Rather, both countries carefully crafted their actions to send strong symbolic messages to the international community at large, and to the United States in particular. Indian leaders, viewing both the long-standing Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and more recent Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty as impinging on India's security needs, also expressly justified the nuclear tests as necessary to uphold national sovereignty and the principle of equal treatment. As Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated, "Some countries think ... they alone can take steps using nuclear technology to protect their borders and that others cannot do so. We cannot accept this." As for North Korea, not only did Minister Kim state outright that his government would resume its cooperation once the United States had acted to "catch up," but none of its actions had immediate or irreversible effects. As noted by Gary Milhollin, director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, North Korea was "sending a clever signal." That signal was quite similar to India's: we expect our position to be taken seriously, and we have the means to demonstrate the costs we can impose for failing to do so. These communicative intentions reveal both countries' cognizance of the political context of their actions.

4. The Proliferation Network

The growing importance of such material and political linkages suggests the emergence of a mutually reinforcing *network* of proliferation prospects. This network positively reinforces incentives for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and hence poses a new challenge to organizations and governments -- and especially to the United States -- pursuing nonproliferation objectives.

Growing links between disparate circumstances mean that, more than ever, decisions and events in one context will have unexpected and unintended implications later on in quite different contexts. North Korea's missile sales to Pakistan exemplify this point: North Korean dissatisfaction with the rate of progress in its relations with the United States contributed to the failure of US diplomacy to achieve North Korean missile proliferation restraint, which became a contributing factor in South Asian instability and ultimately India's nuclear tests. Now, those tests may not only spark a nuclear arms race in South Asia, but also increase insecurity throughout the region and perhaps obstruct ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in the US Congress and START II in the Russian Duma. These cascading consequences threaten to erode the institutions and norms supporting nuclear nonproliferation worldwide, and to resuscitate the obsolescent notion that nuclear weapons provide states with useful and versatile political power and status. We cannot know how this ominous turn in thinking about the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world will affect the future planning of North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and many other states with latent nuclear ambitions.

The nature of this proliferation network indicates that punitive measures -- especially applied *ex post facto* -- are likely to be increasingly ineffective in countering proliferation. In the past, the US government and others seeking to "contain" proliferation have sought to stigmatize such countries as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya as "rogue" states not fit for normal intercourse with the international community. However, the number of governments that now share an interest in proliferation and the myriad linkages among these "discrete" proliferation problems are likely to increasingly undermine any strategy relying upon isolating "deviants" in order to sanction their behavior. Attaching the "rogue state" label to India -- although it now qualifies by many criteria associated with that term in recent years -- would serve less to isolate and stigmatize India than to sap the appellation of any real potency. Judging by the complaints of "hypocrisy" and "unequal treatment" lacing Indian justifications of its actions, such an approach is less likely to contain Indian behavior than it is to reinforce Indian perceptions of persecution and further aggravate tensions. Most of the world's leading countries have shown little interest in a heavily punitive approach in any event. Given this restrained response, threats to apply similar measures to Pakistan are unlikely to persuade its government to refrain from retaliatory measures.

In the face of highly motivated behavior, threats to apply political and economic sanctions are unlikely to be effective if the country can judge them to be a bearable cost, as India apparently has. Such threats are also unlikely to be effective if most such sanctions have already been applied, as is the case with North Korea.

5. Toward a New Nonproliferation Strategy

Facing this intricate proliferation network, nonproliferation efforts need to begin from a strategy of active and multifarious interaction, incorporating positive as well as negative inducements. This strategy might best be called *complex engagement*. Such a strategy would be a first step toward generating a nonproliferation regime strong enough -- and inclusive enough -- to alleviate original incentives for proliferation. For the United States, a strategy of complex engagement would go

beyond the tactics of selective engagement manifested in recent years by fully embracing each of five elements.

First, complex engagement must necessarily continue to involve individual engagement on a country-by-country basis. This is the current US policy premise toward North Korea, and no other policy premise holds more promise despite the ruling regime's inscrutability and recalcitrance. Indeed, simply the prospect of ending existing punitive policies offers incentives for regimes like North Korea's to respond positively to direct engagement. However, even in such bilateral contexts there is room for more integrative approaches treating bilateral relationships in their entirety and focusing on the linkages between the spectrum of issues in those relationships.

Secondly, complex engagement necessitates a conception of involvement with a region as a dynamic system, not simply with each of the countries within it. In particular, the United States has itself too often neglected systemic implications and instead followed short-term tactics that directly contributed to the type of long-term regional proliferation it opposes. For example, the Chinese missile sale to Pakistan followed shortly the sale of F-16 fighter planes to Taiwan, which China saw as a direct violation of the US pledge to refrain from transferring high technology weaponry to Taiwan. In addition, India developed its Agni missile in part using technology originally purchased directly from the United States. The United States will be unable to achieve nonproliferation generally until it can effectively factor long-term systemic consequences into its more proximate decision-making.

Thirdly, complex engagement must mean that the United States, and other nuclear weapons states seeking nonproliferation, recognize more clearly than they yet have how their own lack of progress toward vertical nuclear disarmament adds pressures for horizontal proliferation. Despite their commitment to the premise and goal of vertical disarmament in the first Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, nuclear arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union often made little progress. The agreements that the superpowers did reach, while important, too often offered only a brief respite to the two superpowers' nuclear arms race, and occasionally (as in the SALT I Treaty's incentives to develop MIRV missile technologies) redirected that race in new and even more dangerous directions. Although the START process has produced greater arms reductions, it has fallen short of producing the extent of reductions and other measures that would genuinely reduce the dangers posed by strategic nuclear weaponry. The slowing pace of this process belies even the restrained promise offered by the US in negotiations for the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1995. At the same time, US programs for "sub-critical" nuclear testing and continuing weapons "improvement" effectively obviate much of the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Thus, India does have a point, if not a justification, in emphasizing years of unfulfilled promises for progress toward disarmament by nuclear-armed states. The United States and other nuclear-armed states cannot expect their condemnation of India's actions to be fully credible in the absence of recognition of this linkage.

Fourthly, complex engagement means sustaining over time the requisite levels of attention and commitment to all other elements of engagement. Too often, the United States in particular focuses on a proliferation problem only, as with North Korea in 1993, when the situation is on the verge of exploding; or, as with India today, when the explosions have already occurred. The United States cannot hope to sustain a consistent -- let alone successful -- nonproliferation policy if each abated crisis is followed by waning attentions and flagging efforts, which can only sow the seeds for a new crisis.

Finally, complex engagement means developing an appreciation for the political context of proliferation. During the Cold War, there developed a tendency to regard most nuclear weapons issues, including proliferation, as essentially independent of politics. Ironically, nuclear strategists

and nuclear abolitionists shared this perception: the former in holding that nuclear weapons impose a logic of their own, bestowing a certain universality to theories of deterrence and war-fighting; the latter in holding that the sheer horror of nuclear war renders use of nuclear weapons "unthinkable." The end of the Cold War itself repudiates this notion: despite force levels and launching capabilities that are as lethal as ever, the perceived threat of deliberate nuclear war between the United States and Russia has been dramatically reduced. The source of this reduced threat of war is the improvement in political relations between these countries, which has decreased the animosities and uncertainties that have always lurked behind the abstract veneer of strategic theory. Improved political relations, not improved strategy, moved the superpowers toward greater actual peace. The lesson for Asia is clear: only improvements in the political climate sufficient and enduring enough to reduce intrinsic temptations to proliferate offer long-run hope of achieving nonproliferation goals. Neither the spread of nuclear weapons, nor the prevention of that spread through punitive sanctions or coercive counterproliferation, are likely to help produce that peace.

6. Conclusion

Certainly, the proliferation problem in Asia today cannot be solely attributed to a failure of US nonproliferation policy. Indeed, one of the most intractable features of the problem is that not all agree even that it *is* a problem. Clearly this is not the view of the great majority of Indian citizens who favor their country's acquisition of a deployed nuclear capability -- even as many of them also anticipate the eventual use of these weapons. And no US policy is likely to easily or quickly overcome North Korean contumacy. However, the United States, now the world's solitary superpower and likely to remain so for some time to come, has an assurance of its own basic security needs and hence a latitude of behavior far exceeding that of any other nation. This offers the United States an unprecedented opportunity to articulate and pursue a long-term vision for future regional and global security regimes that takes into account the long shadow its own nuclear weapons attitudes and policies cast over those of all other governments.

Whether or not the United States is able to take the lead in building regional and global security regimes that rely less on threats to use nuclear weapons, this nevertheless must remain the essential goal of nonproliferation advocates. During the Cold War's long nuclear stalemate, the argument arose that mutual nuclear deterrence was in fact a force for peace, strongly discouraging actual war between the superpowers. However, the psychological vulnerability and political tension engendered by mutual assured destruction provided genuine security to no state. Instead, this condition imposed a fearful "warlessness" tantamount to Hobbes's "state of war." Political improvements and disarmament progress in the wake of the Cold War, however limited they have been, nevertheless support the growing consensus on the obsolescence of nuclear weapons as a source of national security. However, India's nuclear tests dramatically reveal that, at the same time, a proliferation network has also burgeoned, drawing strength from Cold War-era conceptions of the political utility of nuclear weapons and other technologies of mass destruction. In pursuing its nuclear option, India certainly perceives itself as defining its interests and behaving no differently than did the United States throughout the Cold War. Many of the United States's own nuclear policies and practices also still derive from such mean calculations. Progress toward genuine nuclear disarmament, in all its facets, depends upon debunking this illusion of "nuclear peace" wherever it emerges and building security regimes capable of replacing persistent nuclear dependency.

III. NAPSNet Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send

responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Wade L. Huntley, Program Director, Asia/Pacific Security
Timothy L. Savage, NAPSNet Coordinator
125 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94710-1616 USA
(510) 204-9296 * Fax (510) 204-9298 *

[Return to top of this page](#) NAPSNet Policy Fora Online

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/napsnet-forum-1-the-implications-of-indias-nuclear-tests/>

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org