
Policy Forum 98-09: Think Again: Nonproliferation



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 98-09: Think Again: Nonproliferation", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 22, 1998,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/napsnet-forum-20-think-again-nonproliferation/>

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

THINK AGAIN: NONPROLIFERATION

#19 -- September 22, 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.

THINK AGAIN: NONPROLIFERATION

Essay by George Perkovich

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CONTENTS:

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by George Perkovich](#)

[III. NAPSNet Invites Your Responses](#)

[Discussion](#)

I. Introduction

The following abstract is adapted from Mr. Perkovich's article, originally published in the Fall 1998 issue of FOREIGN POLICY. George Perkovich directs the Secure World Program at the W. Alton Jones Foundation and is the author of "India's Nuclear Bomb" (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming). More information can be found at [Foreign Policy Online](#) .

Perkovich argues that the recent nuclear tests by India and Pakistan were motivated more by political pressures than by security interests. For that reason, rolling back nuclear development tends to be more difficult in democratic nations where policymakers are less insulated from domestic politics. Given these conditions, Perkovich argues that nonproliferation efforts need to address the question of inequity in international arms control regimes.

II. Article by George Perkovich

"Think Again: Nonproliferation," by George Perkovich

When India and Pakistan conducted a claimed 11 nuclear-bomb tests this spring, their leaders argued that national security imperatives drove them to it. Yet Pakistan's viability as a functioning state has never been more threatened, and India finds its security and foreign relations with China, Pakistan, and the United Nations more troubled than before. More so than security interests, it was political pressures that put Pakistan and India into their current predicaments. Political issues are thus what the United States and other supporters of nonproliferation must address in trying to reverse the spread of nuclear weapons.

Worldwide, the desire to join the nuclear club often has less to do with national security than it does with politics and pride. Israel, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States clearly acquired nuclear-weapons capabilities to redress objective threats to their existence or, at least in the latter three cases, to their systems of government. Yet, in other countries-France, India, South Africa, and the United Kingdom-factors beyond security drove the acquisition of nuclear weapons: the quest for national grandeur, prestige, and independence; the ambition and persuasiveness of leading scientists attracted by the technological challenge and the desire to display personal and national prowess; domestic political jockeying-all of these elements stand out as important components of proliferation.

"We don't want to be blackmailed and treated as oriental blackies," a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesman said in 1993. "Nuclear weapons will give us prestige, power, standing. An Indian will talk straight and walk straight when we have the bomb." French security experts believe that a core

purpose of their nuclear arsenal is to preserve France's permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Irrelevance is the only "clear and present danger" against which France's nuclear weapons defend.

The desire of France and India to develop and maintain a nuclear arsenal, even in the absence of a pressing security threat, illustrates another global trend: Democratic nations tend to be among the worst nuclear addicts. With the exceptions of Argentina and Brazil, no democracies with publicly known nuclear-explosive programs have initiated nuclear rollback. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine decided to relinquish their inherited nuclear weapons before they had made the transition to democratic government, and, indeed, the process of democratization impaired Ukraine's rollback. Authoritarian governments in South Korea and Taiwan abandoned secret nuclear-weapons programs. Former South African president F.W. De Klerk decided in secret to eliminate his country's undeclared nuclear-weapons stockpile and sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, known as the NPT, before the South African public and parliament knew the state had ever possessed such weapons. Two established democracies-Sweden and Switzerland-abandoned nascent nuclear-weapons programs, but the programs were kept secret and the decisions to close them were not open to debate. If democracy and openness do not correlate well with nuclear rollback, democracy does correlate strongly with dogged possession of nuclear weapons: Seven of the eight states now clinging to nuclear weapons are democracies-all but China.

The democratic liability springs from the changes that a country undergoes when it acquires a publicly known nuclear-weapons capability. Whatever a country's original motivations, its decision to acquire nuclear weapons gives rise to a whole new set of psychological, political, economic, and bureaucratic attachments around nuclear weapons and the establishments that produce them. Scientific institutions win deference for their genius and for the high-paying jobs and large revenues they bring to the communities that house them. The military cohorts that command nuclear weapons generate officer billets and other institutional ties. In democracies, politicians who try to break these attachments by urging the elimination of nuclear weapons meet opposition that draws on the now-threatened interests that extend beyond genuine security concerns. Symbols, emotions, language, and institutional interests can easily be mobilized against such politicians in mass-media politics.

But is not arms control a more achievable objective than rollback? Here, too, recent history suggests that democracy is an obstacle. The U.S.-Russian relationship only recently became "democratic," and the two states' efforts to deal with the hangover of nuclear problems inherited from earlier decades have been complicated badly by the Duma and Congress. And, in South Asia, knowledgeable Indians and Pakistanis say that domestic politics keeps their governments from signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which both countries' leaders now recognize to be in their national interests. Indeed, the cynical dynamics of partisan politics cause the greatest risk of an Indo-Pak nuclear- and missile-arms race, as political rivals jockey to demonstrate toughness by pressing for ever greater displays of military might.

Nothing in politics animates people as much as perceived inequity and unfairness. This is particularly true in former colonial countries where questions of race and religion infuse regard for the nonproliferation regime. Indian officials have referred to this regime as a form of "apartheid" since the late 1960s. One does not have to agree with arguments about racism and religious prejudices to recognize their political power. The fact is that India and Pakistan-just like Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States-will not roll back their nuclear programs without equity. Nor will many other countries continue to support a nonproliferation regime that perpetuates the perceived inequity between the nuclear "haves" and "have nots." Security professionals dismiss such political and moral arguments as strategically irrelevant, but, as democracy spreads, the importance of politics in managing security problems will grow. This heightens the necessity for progress toward reciprocal, verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons on a global basis as the only

sustainable way to solve the nuclear threat.

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

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Nautilus Institute

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