The Nuclear Proliferation Landscape: Is Past Prologue?

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The Biden administration has a full plate when it comes to nuclear challenges. As of this writing, Iran’s nuclear program is expanding, and the amount of time Tehran would need to produce enough material for a bomb is shrinking. Even if a diplomatic solution can be found, Iran is likely to retain a latent capability to build nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future. North Korea’s qualitative and quantitative improvements to its nuclear arsenal—including missiles that can reach the United States—mean that it can no longer be considered a minor nuclear nuisance. Evidence suggests that the administration will focus closely on these threats. And it would be right to do so.

But President Biden and his team should also look beyond the immediate horizon. If future proliferation threats look like the past 30 years—that is, so-called “rogue” states such as Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Syria, and Iran—then the United States should feel reasonably confident about its ability to keep the spread of nuclear weapons contained. Aside from Iran, there are few true US adversaries that are likely to mount a new proliferation challenge. The regimes in Libya and Iraq that pursued nuclear weapons are gone, and those two countries as well as Syria are consumed with internal strife that makes reconstitution of a nuclear weapons program unlikely. Moreover, Washington has a wealth of experience and a refined and tested toolkit for managing such threats.

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However, the types of potential proliferators, their strategies, and the geopolitical environment in which US nonproliferation policy operates might well look very different, which could lead to a harder road ahead. Indeed, there are reasons to worry about proliferation or hedging—a strategy whereby countries develop nuclear capabilities to have a bomb “option” but stop short of building a weapon—by US allies and a range of countries that do not fit neatly into a definition of ally or adversary. Saudi Arabia and Turkey—whose leaders have expressed interest in nuclear weapons and have strained relationships with the United States, their nominal security guarantor—are two examples. There are also legitimate questions about whether the traditional US policy toolkit and several associated assumptions about how nonproliferation and counterproliferation work, honed against rogue states, will still apply in the future. It is thus worth comparing the past 30 years to the emerging world and thinking about how the United States might need to adapt.

Rogue States and Nuclear Nonproliferation

Since the mid-to-late 1960s, the United States has placed a major emphasis on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to any country that might seek to acquire them. From the end of the Cold War to the present, however, US nonproliferation efforts have mostly focused on a handful of countries with authoritarian regimes. These countries perceived the United States as a threat and tended to reject the US-led international order in both word and deed. Nearly every US national security strategy since the end of the Cold War has discussed the danger of proliferation as primarily one originating from weaker or so-called “rogue,” “extremist,” or “outlaw” states. The list of countries that meet these criteria has included, at various points, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria—all of which posed a proliferation concern during this period.

Several developments prompted this focus on so-called rogue states after the Cold War. First, there is the simple fact that these countries were the dominant proliferation threat during this time. There was no wave of proliferation among Washington’s democratic allies in Europe or Asia. Second, the international system had changed. The threat of nuclear war between the United States and Russia had receded, allowing the United States to shift its attention to other nuclear challenges. The absence of a peer adversary and an era of US primacy
naturally led Washington to focus on the few countries that could complicate its ability to act unencumbered. As respected political scientist Paul Bracken put it, US confrontation with these rogue states was principally about “whether the United States is going to allow a basic change in international order that it sees as following from the continued spread of nuclear weapons.” Finally, two specific surprises in the early 1990s highlighted the risk of rogue state proliferation: the discovery after the Gulf War that Iraq had made more progress than previously believed on its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, and a realization that North Korea had probably produced enough plutonium for a nuclear weapon.

Although the United States has long feared that conventionally weak states would seek nuclear weapons for purposes of blackmail, after the Cold War these fears became more acute and defined Washington’s conceptualization of the nuclear threat. Former president Clinton’s National Security Advisor Anthony Lake’s 1994 article, “Confronting Backlash States,” succinctly captured both the US diagnosis of the threat as well as the prescribed solution. While recognizing the unparalleled opportunities created for democracy promotion by the end of the Cold War, Lake warned that the United States “must face the reality of recalcitrant and outlaw states that not only choose to remain outside the family but also assault its basic values.” These “aggressive” and “defiant” states, many of which pursue WMD as the “great equalizer,” try to “quarantine themselves from a global trend to which they seem incapable of adapting.”

The solution proposed by Lake was a US-led effort to apply pressure to these countries until they change their behavior. “As the sole superpower, the United States has a special responsibility for developing a strategy to neutralize, contain and, through selective pressure, perhaps eventually transform these backlash states into constructive members of the international community … We seek to contain the influence of these states, sometimes by isolation, sometimes through pressure, sometimes by diplomatic and economic measures. We encourage the rest of the international community to join us in a concerted effort.” The basic ingredients of this solution—US leadership, a focus on pressure, and the support of the international community—would define US counterproliferation policy in the subsequent decades.

Indeed, while each case of proliferation has its own unique attributes, there are some broad features that characterize the proliferation challenges of this era and the way the United States approached them. These features can help illuminate both the drivers of nuclear proliferation among these countries and the US and international policy responses. Some of these policies were controversial and, in the case of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, unnecessary and exceedingly costly. But the outcome of US policy efforts when measured in terms of new nuclear states was quite successful: North Korea is the only country that has developed
nuclear weapons after the Cold War (India and Pakistan’s entry into the nuclear club is typically associated with their 1998 nuclear tests, but they likely assembled their first devices before the end of the Cold War, and India previously conducted a nuclear test in 1974). Collectively, these attributes came to constitute theories or frameworks employed by policy practitioners—even if implicitly—that guided their thinking about how proliferation and nonproliferation work. These frameworks still guide US policy considerations today.

First, these countries sought nuclear weapons and related capabilities in large part because they perceived threats from regional adversaries and/or the United States and lacked a reliable security guarantor. For some, the quick disappearance of the Soviet Union—which had previously served as their protector—exacerbated the scramble to ensure their own security. North Korea feared the superior South Korean and US conventional capabilities, bolstered by the US nuclear umbrella; Iraq had to contend with Iran, and later Washington; and Iran was left to fend off not only the United States, but Israel and the Sunni Arab states as well. True, the nuclear aspirations of most of these countries pre-date the end of the Cold War, and other factors such as domestic politics shaped their nuclear goals, too. But each had acute security threats and few, if any, allies they trusted. At the end of the Cold War, none believed they would fare well in an era of US dominance, so they sought nuclear and missile capabilities and other forms of WMD as an equalizer and deterrent against a US attack. As nuclear expert Brad Roberts observed in 2001, before he later became Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy, it was rogue states—that “resist heatedly the distribution of power”—that constituted “the most egregious problems of non-compliance” for global arms control and nonproliferation regimes. The one leader who opted for an alternative model of abandoning his nuclear program and reorienting his relationship with the West, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, ended up affirming the wisdom of the original strategy when he was later overthrown by NATO-backed rebels.

Second, all of these countries tried to keep key nuclear capabilities and/or nuclear weapons-related efforts secret. This is not surprising given the potential consequences of pursuing nuclear weapons: sanctions, further diplomatic isolation, or even a military strike. The full extent of Iraq’s then-covert nuclear program was not known until after the Gulf War. Syria’s covert nuclear reactor constructed with North Korean assistance only became publicly known when it was destroyed in a 2007 air raid, later claimed by Israel.
kept key nuclear activities secret until an opposition group publicly revealed them in 2002, and today Tehran continues to deny it ever had a nuclear weapons program despite the conclusions of international intelligence organizations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).  

Third, while positive inducements have played an important role in providing diplomatic off-ramps, pressure has been the defining feature of US strategies to prevent proliferation in the post-Cold War era. The US approach to these rogue challenges, then and now, has generally focused on creating extreme economic and political pain on these countries to force their leaders to “cry uncle,” while holding the door open for a diplomatic solution. The United States has routinely used international and unilateral sanctions—often targeted at key economic chokepoints and vulnerabilities of these countries, such as oil in the case of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—in an attempt to cripple their economies and bring their leaders to the negotiating table. At times, it has also implied it would be willing to use military force. These efforts have often been coupled with other counterproliferation measures, such as covert action and interdictions, aimed at slowing technical progress and instilling doubts among leaders about chances of success.

Fourth, in all of these cases the United States sought the support of the international community for its policies to rein in proliferation, often to make the aforementioned pressure tactics more effective. This approach usually involved trying to persuade the international community to Washington’s position that the country in question posed a nuclear or WMD-related threat, and that collective action was required to stop it. These attempts almost always required continuous—and often extensive—diplomatic efforts. For example, Republican and Democratic administrations have long worked to enhance international sanctions against North Korea. Although Presidents Bush and Obama approached diplomacy with Iran differently, they both sought collective international action to slow Iran’s nuclear program.

To be sure, the United States has not hesitated to act on its own, and some would argue Washington’s international lobbying efforts have sometimes been halfhearted. And there have been limits to the international community's willingness to go along—particularly when their own energy, economic, or security interests could be harmed. But the United States has viewed convincing the international community about both the threat and necessary solution as central to its nonproliferation strategy. A long list of UN Security Council Resolutions in response to nuclear threats, the Iran nuclear deal, and consensus among Asia’s powers on the goal of denuclearization on the Korean peninsula suggest that there have been benefits to this approach.

Fifth, this period of proliferation and nonproliferation was also an age of unipolarity and US primacy. As the sole superpower, the United States found itself...
in a tremendously advantageous strategic environment.\textsuperscript{25} US nonproliferation efforts during this time were bolstered by the fact that they were in defense of the nuclear status quo—preventing the emergence of new nuclear states—and thereby one of the key pillars of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This is one reason why Moscow and Beijing were often supportive of multilateral diplomatic efforts, such as the Six Party Talks with North Korea or negotiations that led to the Iran nuclear deal.\textsuperscript{26}

But when differences emerged over specific policies, the United States’ dominant position made it easier for it to impose its will on others, including through its use of pressure-centric strategies and unilateral tools. In these cases, other countries were forced to support, acquiesce to, or, on occasion, attempt to spoil US policies. The Bush administration decision to invade Iraq in 2003 without support from the UN Security Council or some of its closest allies is one example.\textsuperscript{27} The Trump administration could not force Europe to abandon the Iran nuclear deal, but the power of US unilateral sanctions effectively made it impossible for the UK, Germany, France, and the EU to provide Iran with its expected economic benefits.\textsuperscript{28} Russia and China often condemned sanctions and other forms of unilateral US pressure, but their ability to prevent the United States from acting remained limited, and objections mostly took the form of political statements and foot-dragging on implementing their international obligations.\textsuperscript{29} There were also few actions that rogue states could take to respond in ways that imposed meaningful costs on the United States.

\textbf{Is Past Prologue?}

A careful evaluation suggests that the next 30 years may not look like the last 30. Many, if not all, of the characteristics described above have evolved, some significantly. This points to the emergence of a proliferation environment for which the United States is less prepared, conceptually and practically, and for which its tools may be ill-suited.

First, concerns about a lack of US reliability and credibility—not US primacy and power—are likely to dominate at least the next decade with the arrival of a more multipolar world, the rise of China as a peer rival, and an unsettled US domestic political scene. The international order the United States created is facing enormous challenges, and allies with a vested interest in that order are concerned that Washington is becoming estranged from it.\textsuperscript{30} On this front, President Biden represents an important course correction from the Trump years. But few within the United States or abroad seem confident that Biden’s election marks the end of the neo-isolationist “America First” sentiments that guided Trump and his supporters.\textsuperscript{31}
As a result, unlike the decades that followed the end of the Cold War, countries that depend on the United States for security are likely to be more of a proliferation risk than are rogues. Allies and partners will likely look to nuclear capabilities not as a deterrent against a US military strike or regime change, but rather as a bargaining chip, a hedge against an unpredictable and unreliable United States, and as a means for greater independence from Washington. This scenario is not without historical precedent: concerns about declining US credibility in the 1970s sparked several allies and partners to explore or pursue nuclear weapons.32 These same uncertainties are likely contributing to the recent South Korean debate over the potential value of nuclear weapons and Seoul’s investment in missile capabilities that could be leveraged in the future for nuclear weapons delivery.33 They are also probably behind Saudi Arabia’s insistence on having the option to develop an enrichment capability.34

The shifting geopolitical order also means that the concept of rogue states is likely to lose relevance. Previously, rogue states were defined mainly by their rejection of the US-led system and their antipathy toward—and fear of—US dominance. But this lens becomes less useful as US primacy fades, the world becomes more multipolar, and US prioritization shifts from middle-tier powers to near-peer competitors. Further muddying the picture is that several countries that are ostensibly allies or partners no longer fit neatly into those categories such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia.35 Future sources of proliferation anxiety, therefore, are unlikely to be rogue states as defined to date and are more likely to be allies, partners, and countries that lie somewhere in between friend and foe.

Second, the United States probably should not bank on future proliferators pursuing exclusively or predominately covert pathways to nuclear weapons. US intelligence collection, IAEA inspections, and most recently the expansion of open-source information and analysis has made it increasingly difficult for countries to keep their nuclear weapons ambitions hidden.36 The covert nuclear activities of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Libya were all exposed before those countries acquired the ability to produce fissile material. Moreover, the potential economic and political risks of getting caught with an undeclared weapons program would be higher for countries that are integrated into the global economy than they would a country like North Korea.

For allies like Japan and South Korea that might hope to leverage the threat of proliferation to extract security concessions from the United States, purely covert programs are not ideal because they make it harder to subtly signal a possible
nuclear weapons interest to Washington. And for those countries just beginning their nuclear programs, more transparent hedging efforts—such as Saudi Arabia’s announced intent to develop enrichment capabilities—or hybrid covert and overt pathways may become more common. Efforts by Turkey, South Korea, and Japan to improve their missile and space launch capabilities in the open provide another model by which countries can make progress on important components of a nuclear deterrent while remaining compliant with nonproliferation obligations.

Third, how effective will pressure-centric US tools be, particularly if future proliferators are not likely to be rogue states? On one hand, the United States may be able to use a lighter touch. If faced with evidence of nuclear weapons motivations or plans, it may be sufficient for Washington to quietly object, privately warn of the negative effects this would have on the relationship, and offer incentives for remaining non-nuclear. But managing proliferation risks from allies and partners will likely be trickier. It is useful to recall that the last time the United States faced a serious risk of allied proliferation was in the 1970s and 1980s from South Korea and Taiwan. Convincing those countries to abandon their nuclear weapons programs was a long and difficult process; it took about 10 years and 20 years, respectively. The United States had to put tough consequences on the table, which included cutting off energy assistance, withdrawing US troops, and ending its security commitments. Washington also had to be able to credibly commit not to follow through with those actions if these countries complied.

Would the United States be able to re-run that playbook if faced with allied proliferation today? It is not the 1970s anymore—Washington has substantial influence, but in many cases it does not hold the leverage over partners that it once did. It is far from guaranteed that the United States would be willing to threaten or follow through with sanctions or ending its security commitments today.

But the bigger challenge facing Washington would be assuring allies of its staying power given the desire among some US politicians and strategists to reduce overseas responsibilities and shift the defensive burden to partners. Doing so will be even more complicated if allies must gird against whiplash in US foreign policy—and Washington’s role in international treaties, agreements, and commitments—every four to eight years. An ally might find the assurances of one president credible, but what are the chances his or her successor will uphold them? As a result, allies may view US threats of abandonment not as threats, but as unavoidable outcomes, reducing US coercive power.
Unlike pressure against rogue states, following through on punitive actions toward partners could have negative ramifications for important US interests. Trying to dissuade Saudi Arabia—a major oil producer, purchaser of US military equipment, and partner against shared regional adversaries—from going nuclear via threats of sanctions or cuts to military assistance highlights these challenges. Allies also have the ability to respond in ways rogue states do not. North Korea can test a missile, but Turkey can threaten to close US bases on its territory that reportedly house US nuclear weapons, as it did in 2019 following the US threat of sanctions. In other words, the nonproliferation and counterproliferation game is fundamentally different with allies. Is the United States ready to play?

Fourth, the United States might find it more difficult—practically and politically—to build international coalitions against allies, partners, or other countries that are not rogue states. For one, information gathered on allied proliferation is likely to be more sensitive and harder to make public or share widely. The United States had a hard enough time trying to convince countries to take action against Iran, Iraq, and North Korea; it would be harder still to rally the international community against Brazil, Japan, or Saudi Arabia. And the United States might not want to shine a spotlight on potential proliferation efforts by US allies or partners. Doing so could put pressure on the United States to act. It could also risk punitive measures, sabotage, or military action by countries that have a vested interest in these US partners remaining non-nuclear. Collectively, this difficulty suggests that this pillar of US nonproliferation strategy—forming an international consensus and pursuing collective action—will play less of a role in the future.

Finally, the superpower moment is over, and the United States faces a variety of challenges to and constraints on its political, military, and economic power. One consequence of this shift is the erosion of that optimum operating environment that has characterized much of the post-Cold War period. Although the United States still benefits tremendously from its position within the international system, the primacy that allowed the United States to effectively wield its nonproliferation and counterproliferation toolkit for the past several decades no longer exists. A more competitive environment has taken its place. The emergence of strategic competition—either absent or unacknowledged for most of the last 30 years—also introduces a new variable for the United States, its allies, and its rivals when it comes to proliferation and nonproliferation. For allies and partners, the uncertain trajectory of these geopolitical developments provides an incentive to hedge their bets. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt—all of which have close military and security relationships with the United States and ambitions to grow their civil nuclear programs—and others are finding ways to increase their partnership with Russia and China on economics, energy (including nuclear energy), and defense. The Trump administration similarly viewed these moves through a competition-oriented lens: its argument
for cementing a nuclear partnership with Saudi Arabia largely boiled down to “if we don’t, China and Russia will,” which could tip Riyadh further into the orbits of these competitors with lax nonproliferation standards.45

A leveling of the geopolitical playing field and the presence of competition in multiple domains stands to provide US rivals with a greater incentive and ability to shape outcomes relevant to proliferation, but also new vulnerabilities. It is not difficult to foresee, for example, how China and the United States could have divergent views about which type of nuclear and missile capabilities within Saudi Arabia posed a proliferation risk and the appropriate policy response. China in the past has sold Saudi Arabia ballistic missiles and is reportedly assisting Saudi Arabia’s domestic missile program and perhaps even Riyadh’s development of uranium mining and processing capabilities.46 While this assistance will not give Riyadh the ability to produce a nuclear arsenal any time soon, it conflicts with the US goal of preventing—or at least controlling—the spread of missile and nuclear technologies, particularly in the absence of strict international monitoring.

Chinese economic and energy interests in Saudi Arabia—as well as its reported role in Riyadh’s nuclear and missile program—could become a target for US economic and diplomatic pressure. This pressure could potentially compel China or Saudi Arabia to respond. China’s willingness to use sanctions and other coercive economic tools against the United States and its allies has grown steadily, making it likely that Beijing would at least consider an economic response.47

If proliferation concerns about South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, or Australia re-emerge, the interests may be reversed, with Beijing sounding the alarm. The bottom line is that, unlike the bipolar era of the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union were able to cooperate on nonproliferation despite competition, the new era is marked by transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, competition across multiple domains, and greater interdependence, posing challenges to nonproliferation coordination.48 Future proliferation scenarios will likely be complex multi-player endeavors wherein major power alignment on non-proliferation policies may prove illusive, and actions undertaken ostensibly for non-proliferation reasons can impact other domains, and vice versa.

How will the United States manage these tradeoffs? Where will nonproliferation rank as a priority for the United States among competing objectives? At times during the Cold War, other strategic imperatives outweighed nonproliferation. Ignoring the realities of Pakistan’s nuclear progress so as not to disrupt the strategic partnership with Islamabad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan is the clearest
example. In contrast, during the post-Cold War period, the United States was willing to go to great lengths to prevent proliferation to rogue states.

But what will happen when confronting proliferation concerns could mean risking a relationship with a key ally, or undermining the more important goal of competing and defending against a shared adversary? The Trump administration apparently believed that Saudi Arabia’s missile development efforts were a reasonable and understandable counter to Iran’s missile capabilities. The United States has also gradually eased—and in May 2021 agreed to remove completely—restrictions on South Korea’s missile program to counter the North Korean threat, and Seoul appears motivated to develop a submarine-launched ballistic missile capability and perhaps even a nuclear-powered submarine. These developments suggest that tensions between nonproliferation goals and other policy objectives will likely persist.

Implications for US Policy

The nature of the proliferation challenge faced by the United States in the coming decades will likely look significantly different than that of the last 30 years. Indeed, this world—in which proliferation threats stem from allies, partners, and non-rogue states and geopolitical rivalries dominate the security agenda—may look closer to that of the 1960s and 1970s. The above analysis also suggests that the United States might be ill prepared for this future proliferation landscape—to mitigate its risks and to take advantage of any benefits—both because it does not see it coming and because its preferred tools and strategies are out of synch with what is required. Thus, some course correction is necessary.

At a minimum, US policymakers need to begin thinking about what the United States would do if faced with a scenario of allied or partner proliferation and how to grapple with the dilemmas outlined above. Part of this challenge is rooted in detecting and accurately characterizing proliferation. Indicators may be ambiguous, particularly for countries with a high degree of nuclear latency. But the evaluation needs to probe beyond detection and the initial US policy response to avoid the generalities that typically characterize such discussions. Which tools would the United States employ? If sanctions and other penalties, who and what will be targeted, and what might be the consequences for other US interests? What incentives might Washington offer that the targeted country would find credible and attractive? How might the targeted country—and other parties such as China who may have interests at stake—respond? What will the United States do if its first plan of attack fails? The United States may quickly find that the tools it would turn to for managing these threats are fewer, less powerful, and come with greater risks than previously believed.
As policymakers go through this process and uncover conceptual and practical flaws, they will also need to identify new sources of leverage and incentives the United States may be able to offer. But this will be easier said than done. For example, the United States has long used the provision of nuclear reactors and technology as a “carrot” to convince countries to adopt more stringent non-proliferation commitments and as a “stick” to threaten to end cooperation if those countries try to develop nuclear weapons. But the future viability of this tool is in doubt as US competitors can offer more financially attractive deals with fewer nonproliferation restrictions (a dynamic playing out in the bidding over Saudi Arabia’s future nuclear program). Other countries have less need for US-provided nuclear energy either because they are self-sufficient in key areas or are getting out of the nuclear energy business entirely.

Another incentive may be to provide countries with advanced conventional strike or other military capabilities or encourage them to develop those technologies indigenously. While doing so might help scratch the security itch that could otherwise lead them to seek nuclear weapons, it could also allow these countries to develop capabilities that might be useful for nuclear delivery systems, incentivize or exacerbate regional arms races, and create other destabilizing dynamics.

Thus, identifying useful incentives and disincentives and mitigating the risks associated with them will require some deeper thinking among policymakers and analysts. That thinking will need to challenge conventional concepts about what constitutes leverage and how it can be employed in a nonproliferation context.

In a best-case scenario, the above analysis is off the mark, and the absence of rogue state threats means that proliferation concerns will fade into the background. This would be welcome, but it would be at odds with the past 75 years of the nuclear age, during which proliferation threats have evolved rather than ended entirely. Washington therefore needs to be prepared to meet that next evolution.

Notes


24. For example, see Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, “China’s Sanctions Enforcement and Fuel Prices in North Korea: What the Data Tells Us,” 38 North, February 1, 2019, https://www.38north.org/2019/02/bkatzeffsilberstein2019/.


41. Lanoszka, Atomic Assurance, 6.


43. See, for example, Fitzpatrick, Asia’s Latent Nuclear Powers, 25.


49. For details on US policy toward Pakistan’s nuclear program during this period, see “The Pakistani Nuclear Program (1972-1987),” in Miller, Stopping the Bomb, 193–216.


56. Several of these dilemmas are discussed in the context of the Korean Peninsula and East Asia in Bowers and Himm, “Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas.”