

### UNDERESTIMATED: OUR NOT SO PEACEFUL NUCLEAR FUTURE

Henry D. Sokolski

With the world focused on the nuclear crisis in Iran, it is tempting to think that addressing this case, North Korea, and the problem of nuclear terrorism is all that matters and is what matters most. Perhaps, but if states become more willing to use their nuclear weapons to achieve military advantage, the problem of proliferation will become much more unwieldy. In this case, U.S. security will be hostage not just to North Korea, Iran, or terrorists, but to nuclear proliferation more generally, diplomatic miscalculations, and possibly nuclear exchanges between a much larger number of players.

This is the premise of *Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future*, which explores what we may be up against in the next few decades and how we now think about this future. Will nuclear weapons spread in the next 20 years to more nations than just North Korea and possibly Iran? How great will the consequences be? What can be done?

*Underestimated* is the sequel to Mr. Sokolski's first book, *Best of Intentions: America's Campaign against Strategic Weapons Proliferation*. That volume was largely historical and written in support of a graduate-level course. The thinking behind *Best of Intentions* was straightforward: Determining where we are necessarily requires familiarity first with where we have been.

As Mr. Sokolski continued to teach, though, he noticed another gap in the literature. The arguments policymakers and academics were making on how nuclear weapons reductions related to preventing further nuclear proliferation were, at best, uneven. Each of the basic views—official, hawkish, and academic—spotlighted some important aspect of the truth, but each was incomplete and surprisingly optimistic.

The current official U.S. view, shared by most arms control proponents, is that any state that has nuclear weapons is obliged to make further nuclear weapons reductions under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Most who hold this view also believe that nuclear weapons are only useful to deter others' use of these weapons, that this mission can be accomplished with relatively few nuclear weapons, and that we can make significant, additional strategic arms reductions at little or no cost to our national security. Most of those holding these views also argue that states with advanced "peaceful" nuclear technology are obliged to share it with nonweapons states as a *quid pro quo* to get these states to uphold their NPT pledges.

A second, more hawkish view rejects these positions, arguing that the link between nuclear reductions and proliferation is negative: Further significant nuclear weapons cuts could well encourage America's adversaries to "sprint to nuclear parity," and that such efforts could prompt Washington's non-nuclear allies to hedge their security bets by going nuclear themselves.

Finally, some academics are skeptical of both of these views. They identify themselves as "neorealists." The most radical and thought-provoking of these are divided roughly into two camps—those that believe nuclear deterrence works and those that do not. This difference is significant but not as great as what unifies their thinking—a shared disbelief that there is much of a link between nuclear weapons reductions, nonproliferation, and international security.

Each of these views—official, hawkish, and radically academic—is intellectually attractive. Each is concise. All, however, are incomplete. None fully explore the regional insecurities that arise with threatened nuclear weapons breakouts or ramp-ups.

Instead, they dwell on the security impacts of nuclear proliferation after states actually have broken out or ramped up. Nor do they have much to say about the significant overlaps between civilian and military nuclear activities or the risk that “peaceful” nuclear facilities or materials might be diverted to make bombs. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on nuclear weapons and their impact on international security (albeit in differing time frames). Finally, none adequately consider the discontinuous view that fewer nuclear weapons in fewer hands is desirable but that rushing to achieve such reductions without first getting key nuclear states to reduce in a transparent, coordinated fashion could easily make matters worse.

This brief volume covers each of these points. First, it reviews the key popular views on nuclear proliferation. Second, it considers how much worse matters might get if states continue with relatively loose nuclear constraints on civilian and military nuclear activities. Finally, it offers several policy recommendations.

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