



Executive Summary

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UNDERESTIMATED: OUR NOT SO PEACEFUL NUCLEAR FUTURE Second Edition

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Underestimated was written to fill a gap in the nonproliferation literature. The arguments policymakers and academics are making on how nuclear weapons reductions relate to preventing further nuclear proliferation are, at best, uneven. Each of the basic views—arms control, hawkish, and academic—spotlight some important aspect of the truth, but each is incomplete and surprisingly optimistic.

The view most arms control proponents propound is that any state that has nuclear weapons is obliged to make further nuclear weapons reductions under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The superpowers promised to make such reductions, they contend, to get non-weapons states to accept intrusive nuclear inspections and to abstain from acquiring nuclear arms. 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, as such, we can make significant, additional strategic arms reductions at little or no cost to our national security. Pursuing such reductions and strengthening existing nuclear security measures also are desirable, they argue, because nuclear weapons and their related production infrastructures are vulnerable to unauthorized or accidental firings, terrorist seizure, sabotage, and possible use.

Almost all of those holding these views argue that states with advanced "peaceful" nuclear technology are obliged to share it with nonnuclear weapons states as a quid pro quo to get these states to uphold their NPT nonproliferation pledges. Thus, civilian nuclear sharing, nonproliferation, and strategic arms reductions are viewed as three equally critical "pillars" of an NPT "bargain."

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." Such efforts, in turn, could easily spook Washington's allies who lack nuclear weapons (e.g., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Japan) to hedge their security bets by acquiring their own. To avoid such proliferation, this group contends that keeping or increasing U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities (especially vis-à-vis China and Russia) is our best bet.

Finally, some academics are skeptical of both these views. They identify themselves as neorealists, and are divided roughly into two camps—those who believe that nuclear deterrence works and those that do not. Their disagreement here is significant but not as great as what unifies their thinking—a shared disbelief in there being any major link between nuclear weapons reductions, nonproliferation, and international security.

Mainstream neorealists emphasize what they believe to be the automaticity of nuclear deterrence. They contend that the further spread of nuclear weapons is far less harmful to the world's security than is commonly assumed and that, because nuclear weapons are so effective in deterring wars, their further proliferation could actually help keep the peace.

A second and more recent neorealist school, though, rejects faith in nuclear deterrence. It sees little military value in nuclear weapons and concludes that their further spread is largely inconsequential. As for trying to prevent proliferation, this newer school of neorealism argues that this can be far more dangerous and provocative—they spotlight the invasion of Iraq—than letting these weapons spread.

Each of these views—arms control, hawkish, and academic—is intellectually attractive. Each is concise. All, however, are incomplete. None fully explore the

regional insecurities that arise with a threat of nuclear weapons breakouts or ramp-ups. Instead, they dwell on the security impacts of nuclear proliferation after states have actually 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 book 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 suggests what might be done to avoid the worst.

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