

Nuclear War: Just a Matter of Time?

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## NUCLEAR WAR: JUST A MATTER OF TIME?

*“I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace.” Harry Truman, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, 16 hours after the bombing of Hiroshima. (Jayna & Dollison, 2009)*

Nuclear arms control has been the most vitally important issue of the twentieth century, from the early days of Atomic development to the zenith of the Cold War, but today that same issue has assumed an entirely new tone. Cognizance of the nuclear threat has been in decline since the apex of the Cold War in the 1960s when international incidents like the Cuban Missile Crisis took center stage in the global consciousness; the issue was simpler then, distilled into two polarizing ideologies separated by the Iron Curtain (Height of the Cold War, 2007). With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 the general public’s awareness of the nuclear threat deteriorated, even to the point of believing that nuclear conflict was a thing of the past (Nuclear Weapons at a Glance, 2012). While mutually assured destruction and nuclear superpowers may no longer be an issue, localized nuclear conflict remains the most potent threat to modern society, as can be seen in the continued existence of non-signatories to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the development of nuclear weapons in the ‘axis of evil’, and the advancement of nuclear terrorism over the past decade (Understanding Nuclear Threats, 2011).

Long held the standard of nuclear arms control, the NPT has several key non-signatories which threaten to erupt in nuclear violence. First, while the Israeli government maintains an official policy of ambiguity, the overwhelming majority of global experts, including the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) and the International Atomic

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Energy Agency (IAEA), believe Israel has between 40 and 200 nuclear weapons (Cohen, 2010). Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is not in and of itself dangerous, but combined with the potential development of nuclear weapons in Iran it constitutes a major issue (NTI Israel Country Profile: Nuclear, 2011). Currently Israel is content to allow major Western powers such as the United States to impose economic sanctions on Iran thereby discouraging the country's nuclear ambitions, but many Israeli political and military officials advocate a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear infrastructure: Israel's Minister of Defense Ehud Barak has argued that, "it is preferable to pay the steep price of war than to allow Iran to acquire military nuclear capability" (NTI Israel Country Profile: Nuclear, 2011). Another disastrous repercussion of Israeli noncompliance with the NPT and other major international sanctions is the potential for massive retaliation. Unbound by international treaty and surrounded by hostile nations ambitious for nuclear weapons, Israel uses the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter invasions from neighboring Arab countries. Israel operates under the unofficial, but widely recognized, 'Samson Option', described by GlobalSecurity.org founder John Pike as, "an all-out attack against an adversary should defenses fail and population centers be threatened" (Weapons of Mass Destruction: Strategic Doctrine, 2011). Given the current political unrest and historical hostility between Israel and its neighbours, full scale nuclear conflict is entirely possible (Top Iranian Commander Warns for First Time of Potential Israel War, 2012). Second, India and Pakistan, two of the world's nine nuclear states, possess large nuclear stockpiles and could plausibly use them against each other. Since the countries became independent in 1947 four major wars have been fought between them, the latest one in 1999 (Timeline: India-Pakistan Relations, 2011). Vast cultural and religious differences

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between the nations have historically been the catalysts for war, as well as conflict over the Kashmir region. These issues persist today; Islamic fundamentalism and secular Hindu nationalism remain diametrically incompatible and disputes over Kashmir continue (The Consequences of Nuclear War Between India and Pakistan, 2002). In fact, tensions between the countries will likely increase in the future as global climate change results in territorial water disputes (Gwynn Dyer Lecture, 2012). Additionally, unlike in the Cold War when nuclear conflict was synonymous with mutually assured destruction, a potential war between India and Pakistan would not result in the annihilation of either country. The USSR's nuclear arsenal peaked in 1986 with 45 thousand warheads, while the US peaked in 1966 with 32 thousand warheads and a combined power of 41 691.17 megatonnes (Nuclear Stockpiles: Cumulative estimates, 2007). Today India has between 80 and 100 warheads while Pakistan has between 80 and 110 and a combined output of 2.3 megatonnes (Status of World Nuclear Forces, 2012). With 0.005% of the explosive potential of the Cold War superpowers, it is feasible that India and Pakistan could go to war without fear of complete nuclear annihilation. Recent studies published by the Pentagon claim a nuclear Indo-Pakistani war would result in 12 million deaths, while the NRDC estimates range from 22.1 to 30 million casualties (The Consequences of Nuclear War Between India and Pakistan, 2002). Additional analysis provided by the MIT Center for International Studies suggests that both the conventional military and nuclear capacities of India and Pakistan are remarkably similar, and though a war between these two nuclear powers would have catastrophic consequences, without the threat of absolute nuclear destruction it is a virtual inevitability (What Might an India-Pakistan War Look Like?, 2012). Last, North Korea persistently defies the NPT and is always a realistic

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threat to use nuclear weapons. North Korea is non-participant with practically every major international non-proliferation treaty and continues to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction, as well as intercontinental missile technology (NTI North Korea Country Profile: Overview, 2011). In fact, former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates claimed in 2011 that North Korea was within 5 years of developing intercontinental missile systems and was becoming, “a direct threat to the United States.” (North Korea’s Nuclear Program, 2012). On other potential targets of North Korean nuclear attack, an anonymous South Korean government official stated to the New York Times that North Korean nuclear weapons posed an “existential threat” to the continued existence of his country (South Korean Official Warns of ‘Existential Threat’ From North, 2012). With the historical conflicts between the two countries and their vast ideological differences a Korean conflict is likely to occur sometime in the near future, and when it does North Korea will assuredly deploy its growing nuclear arsenal. In his book *Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes on the World*, Chinese lawyer and author Gordon Chang calls the situation in North Korea, “the fiercest game of chicken on the planet .... everything is on the line in North Korea” (Chang, 2006). According to a recent paper published by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), North Korea could potentially be fielding 48 nuclear weapons by 2015 (North Korea’s Stocks of Plutonium and Weapon-Grade Uranium, 2012). Coupled with the aforementioned assessment of Robert Gates, North Korea, the only dictatorial nuclear power and historical enemy of both the USA and South Korea, could have the potential to launch a large number of intercontinental nuclear missiles by 2015. As evidenced by Iranian-Israeli tensions, potential Indo-Pakistani conflicts, and the rapid development of

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North Korean nuclear capacity, NPT non-signatories are coalescing to make nuclear conflict the most important issue facing modern society.

Along with the NPT non-signatories, the ‘axis of evil’ countries represent a definite threat to acquire, and potentially use, nuclear arms in the next decade. First, Iran is thought by much of the developed world to be seeking nuclear arms, and is one of the few countries with the motivation to use them. Both the USA and most major European nations believe Iran is developing nuclear weapons, and in 2011 an official IAEA report corroborated this belief (Iran’s Nuclear Program, 2012). The Non-Proliferation Review, a well established and refereed journal, also believes, “it is too late to prevent Iran from acquiring the materials or knowledge needed to develop nuclear weapons” (Why Iran Wants The Bomb and What It Means for US Policy, 2012) This is important because Iran is the only nuclear power that has called for the complete destruction of its enemy as a sovereign nation; Iran officially denies the Holocaust and wills the total disestablishment of Israel as a functional entity (Iran and the Threat of Nuclear Weapons: A response to Kenneth Waltz, 2012). Combined with Israel’s Samson Option and general policy of massive retaliation, Iranian acquisition of nuclear arms could trigger a devastating nuclear war. Second, although only one member of the ‘axis of evil’ currently possesses nuclear weapons, North Korea is a major threat to proliferate its technology and radioactive materials. According to the NTI, of the 32 countries in possession of nuclear materials North Korea ranks last in security (North Korea ranks last for nuclear weapons security, 2012). The country refuses to comply with international security regulations and repeatedly denies access to IAEA inspectors (Chronology of U.S. – North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy, 2012). Despite international

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pressures to cease proliferation, substantial evidence suggests that North Korea has sold nuclear arms and technology to countries including Iran and Syria (How to Stop North Korea's Weapons Proliferation, 2009). By introducing missile and nuclear technology into the Middle East, North Korea has further destabilized the region and facilitated nuclear ambitions in both Iran and Syria; one a country desiring the destruction of Israel and another country currently embroiled in a bloody civil war. The nuclear proliferation of North Korea has heightened the potential for a nuclear war in the Middle East which would threaten millions of lives. Last, even the idea of nuclear arms in the possession of the 'axis of evil' could spark war. In recent memory the U.S. government claimed to have invaded Iraq on the basis of the country's possession of WMD's (Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2004). Whether or not the United States actually thought Iraq possessed WMD's is irrelevant; what matters is the fact that the vast majority of the American public believed they did and saw WMD's as a legitimate justification for war. Modern society places a symbolic significance on the possession of nuclear weapons, and this perceived importance can be used as justification either for the invasion of a country or the ambitious pursuit of nuclear arms. Belief in the scientific and cultural desirability of nuclear arms and their representative significance in the advancement of a civilization can be referred to as the constructivist model and is one of the reasons why Iran might want to develop nuclear weapons (Why Iran Wants The Bomb and What It Means for US Policy, 2012). Inspiring proactive violence against ambitious nuclear powers while simultaneously incentivizing the acquisition of nuclear weapons in developing countries, the mere idea of nuclear arms in the 'axis of evil' directly results in bloodshed. Whether seen in their acquirement in Iran, their proliferation from North Korea, or their

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glorification as an idea, nuclear weapons in the 'axis of evil' will become the source of future conflicts.

Although only newly emergent, nuclear terrorism poses an immediate threat that will only become more pronounced in the future. First, in an increasingly globalized world the materials and technology necessary to construct a rudimentary nuclear weapon are becoming easier to obtain. National boundaries are growing increasingly porous and countries with more relaxed security standards are at risk of nuclear theft (Nuclear Proliferation and the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism, 2004). One report published by Mathew Bunn, senior research associate of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, went so far as to state that, "the essential ingredients of nuclear weapons exist in over 40 countries, and there are scores of sites that are not secure enough to defeat the capabilities that terrorists and criminals have demonstrated" (Securing the Bomb, Bunn). However, with the proliferation of nuclear materials and technology through countries like North Korea the most likely way in which a terrorist organization would acquire a nuclear weapon would be by purchasing raw fissionable materials on the black market and fashioning a crude nuclear weapon (Understanding the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism, 2012). The actual technology is almost universally available, and former Director General of the IAEA and Nobel Laureate Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei suggests that the most effective, and perhaps only, way to prevent nuclear terrorism is to control the distribution of nuclear materials (Nuclear Proliferation and the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism, 2004). However, even that relatively modest task is impossible with the continued non-compliance of North Korea and other countries with access to fissionable materials; the materials and technology are available, and for the

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foreseeable future will remain so. Second, several terrorist groups have the motivation and resources necessary to acquire this fissionable material and create a crude bomb. Many politico-religious terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda and the North Caucasus terrorist groups, have stated their intention to create a fission bomb (The U.S. – Russia Joint Assessment of Nuclear Terrorism, 2011). Following 9-11 the Belfer Center reported that the “fabrication of at least a 'crude' nuclear device was within al-Qaida's capabilities, if it could obtain fissile material.” Further, Osama bin Laden stated in 1998 that, “acquiring WMD for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty” (Nuclear Terrorism Fact Sheet, 2011). Although the death of bin Laden has damaged his organization’s plans to acquire fissionable materials, senior Al Qaeda leadership continue with nuclear plans (The threat of nuclear terror, 2011). Four major terrorist organizations around the world have nuclear ambitions and five have been identified by the Belfer Center as being capable of processing raw fissionable material into an improvised nuclear device (IND) (Nuclear Terrorism Fact Sheet, 2011). Motive and capability exist; all that remains is the action. Last, the sheer number of informed experts that acknowledge nuclear terrorism as a viable and urgent threat shows that it is the most pressing issue facing modern society. Experts including Barak Obama, Ban-Ki-moon, Hilary Clinton, Mohamed ElBaradei, and Dmitry Medvedev are unanimous in their proclamation of nuclear terrorism as a major threat (Nuclear Terrorism Fact Sheet, 2011). In 2011 a Russian-U.S. joint assessment studied the various aspects of this issue and concluded that, “If current approaches toward eliminating the threat are not replaced with a sense of urgency and resolve, the question will become not if but when, and on what scale, the first act of nuclear terrorism occurs” (First Joint U.S. – Russia Assessment of Nuclear Terror Threat, 2011). If Russian Prime

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Ministers, U.S. Secretaries of Defense, Director Generals of the IAEA and the U.N., Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, the President of the United States, and experts at every level of government agree that nuclear terrorism will likely occur unless global powers intervene, who could disagree? Nuclear terrorism is a real and present danger as can be seen as can be seen in the increasing access to nuclear materials, the continuing motivation of major terrorist organization, and the prevailing sentiment expressed by political experts.

Nuclear conflict is often forgotten, dismissed as a relic of a bygone age. The truth is startlingly different: nuclear conflict remains the most dangerous global issue, as evidenced by the growth of nuclear tensions between NPT non-signatories, the development of nuclear arsenals in the 'axis of evil', and the birth of nascent nuclear terrorism. Though much has changed since 1945, some things remain the same, and today nuclear conflict remains an ever-present threat to the maintenance of world peace.

*“As a nuclear power – as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon – the United States has a moral responsibility to act ... We must ensure that terrorists never acquire a nuclear weapon. This is the most immediate threat to global security ... To protect our people, we must act with a sense of purpose without delay.”* Barak Obama, May 6, 2010, 65 years after the bombing of Hiroshima (Obama Prague Speech On Nuclear Weapons: FULL TEXT, 2010)

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