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The U.S. and the Proliferation Situation: An Opinion

My experience this past summer was truly remarkable. From May to August, I interned at the Osgood Center for International Studies. During that time, I lived in Washington DC and became immersed in the political heart of America. I was able to participate in conferences focusing on leadership and public policy hosted by the Osgood Center, which allowed me to meet some of the brightest and most interesting people in my entire life, most of whom were natives of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. For my internship proper, I focused on the topic of nuclear non-proliferation. While I had a long standing interest in this subject, I had almost no experience or background knowledge at the outset.

To close this information gap and get a sense of where the US currently stood on the myriad of issues and crisis relating to nuclear weapons, I took advantage of many sources made open to me through the Osgood Center's programs. I was able to attend the release of the report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Committee hosted by Hans Blix himself, listened to presentations by numerous heads of state both domestic and international, sat in on Congressional testimony, and participated in the numerous panel discussions organized by such organizations as the Woodrow Wilson Center, American Enterprise Institute, and a myriad of other terrific public policy think-tanks. As is to be expected from people on the outside of an issue looking in, most of these sources were critical of the approaches employed by the Bush Administration to one degree or another but almost all seemed to offer constructive, well thought out criticisms and suggestions.

The result of my work on nuclear non-proliferation issues forced me to conclude that the US policies under President Bush have lacked both focus and thoughtfulness in an area in which a comprehensive and reasoned approach is paramount to our national security and global stability.

Since the Bush administration took over the American ship of state, its non-proliferation and disarmament policies have resulted in one debacle after another. “Over the past decade, there has been a serious, and dangerous, loss of momentum and direction in disarmament and non-proliferation efforts” (WMDC 17). Particularly since the beginning of the Bush Administration, the US’s lead has been erratic at best; its non-proliferation policies have been both conflicting and alarming. From the Iraq war and onwards, the Bush Administration has been inconsistent with its non-proliferation agenda, with actions ranging from pre-emptive strikes on nations with *possible* illegal nuclear programs, to ultimatum diplomacy with nations that *do* have questionable nuclear programs, to rewarding nations that have achieved nuclear status outside of the NPT. The US has mishandled and continues to mishandle the critical situations in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

Recent US policies have dealt considerable damage to the credibility of the multi-national non-proliferation regime such as the nuclear trade deal with India, refusal to ratify the comprehensive test-ban treaty, and the Administration’s attempts at developing new strategic technology such as the missile defense system and “bunker-buster” nuclear weapons. Its most promising attempt at creating a comprehensive policy was received by the world as attempting to push US-centric nuclear fuel regulations on everyone else. In the aftermath of all of these detrimental policies, the US needs to create and commit to a

comprehensive policy that addresses non-proliferation and disarmament issues in a way that can garner the support of the international community.

Though the Bush Administration had established itself as skeptical of international cooperation and multi-lateral efforts from the start, this doctrine took on new life during the lead up to the war in Iraq. The Administration claimed detailed intelligence of a reconstituted Iraqi nuclear weapons program, which we now know was both fabricated and exaggerated, despite the fact that UN weapons inspectors found evidence of no such program. While the weapons inspectors asked for more time to confirm the lack of an Iraqi program, the US gave a sensationalized presentation to the UN General Assembly to justify their calls for war (Wilkerson). Then the US went ahead with its now infamous “pre-emptive strike” doctrine, proceeding to invade and conquer Iraq only to find that they had, in fact, abandoned their nuclear program, as the UN inspectors had concluded.

The invasion of Iraq, a state which had cheated on the NPT but abandoned the program when confronted with international pressure, on falsified or exaggerated intelligence severely damaged the credibility of the US. The handling of the Iraq “crisis” set a horrible example of how possible proliferation situations would be approached in the future. It is this example and lack of credibility combined with ultimatum-style diplomacy that is stalling efforts to resolve the current situation with Iran. Located next to Iraq, Iran is now, ironically, doing everything the Bush Administration erroneously accused Iraq of. It is violating its safeguards agreements under the NPT, almost certainly for the purposes of developing a nuclear program intended for weapons production; it is a destabilizing force in the region; and it is actively supporting terrorist organizations.

There is very real danger that, if Iran were allowed to achieve nuclear weapon capability, it would use it to dominate the Middle East and equip terrorists with these weapons of mass destruction. Iran could have this capability in as little as three years, and certainly will within the next ten years unless their program is stopped (Global Leadership). The US's only engagement with the Iranians has been to refuse to sit down and negotiate a cessation of their uranium enrichment program until they suspend the very same program. To have the precondition of negotiation to be the end-goal of negotiations is clearly illogical and unreasonable, and combined with repeated use of the phrase "all options are on the table" sends the counterproductive message that the US does not want to negotiate at all. From Iran's point of view, drawing on the example of Iraq, they may very well be pre-emptively attacked even if they *do* suspend their programs, so there is little incentive for them to cease pursuing a nuclear deterrent capability.

North Korea already possesses such a deterrent, and the US now has to deal with an increasingly tense situation on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea first withdrew from the NPT and then kicked its weapons program into full-gear; however the result that a non-nuclear state developed a nuclear weapons capacity remains unchanged by this legal technicality. In this instance, the US has chosen legitimate multi-lateral negotiations called the Six-Party Talks, sitting down at the same table as North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. However, these negotiations have degenerated into the "Six-Party Stall," as each party to the talks is seeking their own agenda (Lee). The US has been unable, largely due to an ever-increasing lack of credibility as well as its own policies, to articulate a non-proliferation platform on which the other parties could stand and present N. Korea with a relatively united front (Lee). A growing frustration with a

process the Administration is already skeptical of, combined with North Korea's recent aggressive missile tests, make a diplomatic solution look increasingly unlikely unless circumstances change. In fact, things could escalate even further, as members of Japan's government have already called for guarantees of US pre-emptive military action should North Korea continue testing nuclear delivery missiles in Japan's direction (Yamasaki).

Another serious non-proliferation concern, but thankfully not a crisis, is the US/Indian nuclear energy deal. The agreement, which was brokered earlier this summer, would see the Bush administration reverse over forty years of domestic US non-proliferation law to give civilian nuclear technology to a state outside of the global non-proliferation regime. India stayed outside the NPT specifically to develop a nuclear weapons program, which it has had for well over 25 years and is continually expanding. Officials of the Administration, such as Secretary of State Rice, have described the deal's insistence on limited safe guards and its naturally normalizing and tightening effect on relations between India and the rest of the non-proliferation community as a net positive for non-proliferation; Secretary Rice has also stated before Congress that the deal was not intended as any sort of arms control agreement (Boese 23). In fact, many critics in the field assert that providing for India's civilian nuclear needs will allow, even encourage, the Indian government to divert more of its domestic resources into its military program (Boese 23, WMDC 82). This concern is real, but relatively weak in the face of the larger issue.

The US, the superpower and global leader, has agreed to directly support the nuclear efforts of a nation that achieved that capability outside of the NPT. This establishes an awful precedent for nations such as North Korea, which withdrew from the

NPT to do precisely what India has done, and other India's non-NPT nuclear neighbor Pakistan. They look at the US/India relationship and ask "Why not me, too?" (Boese 25). The only answer the US has to give is that they have a good relationship with India, and that India has been a responsible nuclear citizen committed to the ideals of the NPT. This is a poor argument, as governments and the relationships between them are not static and inevitably change over time. Additionally, to claim that India follows the NPT in all but name is a stretch innate of itself. Under the NPT, nuclear states make a commitment to eventual disarmament. When I asked a senior official at the Indian embassy if India's commitment to the ideals of the NPT extended to this important area, my question was soundly ignored.

The Indian nuclear deal is not the only treaty-related way the US is undermining its own non-proliferation efforts. The US has not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, a treaty designed to prevent all forms of nuclear testing via extensive monitoring and verification infrastructure. It is widely held that the lack of support from the United States is the principle cause for many other countries not to ratify the treaty, including China, which is preventing it from entering into force. The US, while it has not tested a nuclear weapon in over twenty-five years, refuses to give up the theoretical right to do so at some point in the future. Far from an isolated negative message, this theme has been repeated throughout the tenure of the Bush Administration. The Administration refuses to subjugate American sovereignty for any purpose, relying instead on unilateral measures and the US's own strength and interests. Such actions, while understandable from the aspect of protecting sovereignty, send mixed signals on the non-proliferation

front to states like North Korea that *have* withdrawn from international agreements and subsequently become the focus of US criticism.

One such agreement that the US has withdrawn from is the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty it concluded with the Soviet Union and, until recently, had kept up with Russia. This treaty was an agreement not to develop and deploy ballistic missile defense systems, on the grounds that such a system would destabilize the global strategic balance and lead to further arms races. The Bush Administration withdrew the US from the treaty and began a missile defense program. This missile defense system has been controversial, to say the least. It has also been costly, and its effectiveness is hotly debated even within the US Dept. of Defense (SPUSA). The missile system relies on inert interceptor missiles that attempt to fly head on into incoming ICBM's, a method which several Defense Department officials admit is woefully prone to ineffectiveness, especially when overwhelmed with a large number of incoming missiles, including possible decoys (SPUSA). While the negative fallout from this policy is likely not to surface immediately, one consequence that may arise is greater ICBM build up in China (though, again, the nature and purpose of the Chinese program remains somewhat unclear).

In a similar situation, the Bush Administration has repeatedly pushed for the development of new kinds of nuclear weapons. The most infamous of these proposed weapons systems is the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, or "bunker buster". The justification given for this is that the current strategic arsenal is unfit for attacking hardened underground bunkers and tunnels that may become targets during the War on Terror, and since Cold-War MAD theory does not apply to terrorists, we should not hesitate to employ targeted, overwhelming nuclear force to destroy them. From the

perspective of the Pentagon, there are theoretical applications and thus justifications for such a weapon (SPUSA).

However, most of the targets cited in the Administration's justifications are part of the infrastructure of states, such as underground bunkers and facilities. Troublingly the very nature of the target and the weapon means that the possibility for hitting a misidentified target and causing massive collateral and environmental damage is high (Williams). There is also the danger that making the use of a nuclear weapon that much more plausible lowers the threshold for use, and opens America up to retaliatory nuclear strikes. Thankfully, the US Congress repeatedly denies funding for the acquisition of such weapons, though they continue to approve research into their development. Needless to say, however, the US's development of entirely new kinds of nuclear weapons alarms many nations and outrages members of the international non-proliferation and disarmament regimes.

The one area of at least a partially positive nature is the Bush Administration's development of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. The GNEP is a system of exchange between advanced nuclear nations and non-nuclear states desiring civilian nuclear energy to fuel their development. What the GNEP envisions is a closed fuel cycle, in which the nuclear weapon states, who already have infrastructure and safeguards, control enrichment and all other potentially proliferating phases. The non-nuclear states would be given nuclear technology and light-water reactors, and would be relieved of the cost and inconvenience of developing their own enrichment and waste-storage facilities (DOE).

On the surface, it is an extremely good plan. But the GNEP flopped for two important and correctable reasons. The first is a technical one: that the technology for some of the implementation of the GNEP, particularly its waste-material elimination processes, has yet to make it out of the lab. The second is, again, a symptom of the repeated themes of the Bush Administration. The way the GNEP has always been presented is in terms of America's interests and America's security, with the benefits to the rest of the world coming off almost as secondary "by-products". This, of course, was not well received by the international community upon which the system would rely for implementation and success. Nevertheless, the GNEP is a step in the right direction, and its blueprint for a closed fuel cycle is compelling from a non-proliferation perspective.

The non-proliferation regime established by the NPT's near universal acceptance continues to face tremendous challenges. Yet these challenges are continually met in a hodge-podge fashion by the leading power in the international system. The Bush Administration, which in the face of terrorism should truly be an Administration taking great care to address these issues, is employing responses and policies that undermine its own non-proliferation agenda. The loss of credibility and the sending of mixed messages over the Iraq debacle has stained the image of America and ruined its credibility in the world, especially on non-proliferation matters. It is this lack of credibility combined with a mind-boggling "diplomatic" strategy that is preventing an effective handling of crisis in Iran and North Korea.

Additionally, the US, pursuing its own interests and what the Bush Administration believes to be good for non-proliferation, is actually undermining the international non-proliferation and disarmament regimes through its nuclear deal with

India. The US also undermines the global system by refusing to respect or ratify, or have certain allies like India respect or ratify, key international agreements yet criticizing “rogue” states for doing the same thing and by developing new strategic systems like the missile defense system and the bunker-buster nuclear weapon. One of the Administrations definite bright spots lies in the GNEP, a plan with great promise that was heartily swatted down by the international community because of a US-centric presentation.

If I have taken anything away from this summer in Washington, it is that a comprehensive non-proliferation policy is necessary for global stability and safety. A revised and more inclusive version of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, along with the acceptance of the CTBT and other non-proliferation recommendations, is a promising way to do this. Regardless of the exact nature of the US’s comprehensive approach to non-proliferation and disarmament, it is clear that the current patchwork approach must be discarded. Efforts to revive America’s credibility and capability for being the driving force behind the international non-proliferation and disarmament regime are paramount. Such efforts are in US interests, as are their results. But if the US refuses to be a responsible leader on these issues, the threat of more proliferation and arms races becomes more and more ominous, and the menace of an aggressive use of a nuclear weapon, by either a state or a terrorist group, becomes terrifyingly real.

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