

The Proliferation Of Nuclear Weapons: The New International System and the Middle East

By Kevin F. Jowers

Nuclear weapons entered the arena of international politics with the close of World War II. Although the ensuing Cold War passed without these weapons being used in combat, the post-Cold War world has introduced a new international system. As a result, many of the conditions that helped maintain nuclear peace during the Cold War have disappeared and risks of future proliferation and use of nuclear weapons have increased. This article examines the changes in the international system since the end of the Cold War and discusses the realist arguments for and against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The author also focuses on the Middle East, the dynamics of which make the region a useful paradigm for assessing the risks posed by future proliferation to the international system.

INTRODUCTION

The threat of nuclear war was a matter of constant concern during the Cold War. While that era came to a close without nuclear weapons being used in combat, the international system that has emerged has brought with it increased concern over the future of proliferation and possible use of nuclear weapons. The conditions that promoted nuclear peace during the Cold War have largely disappeared and the characteristics of the post-Cold War world, as seen by realists, have increased the incentives of states to pursue nuclear capability. While realists disagree over the consequences of future proliferation to international security, an analysis of the Middle East highlights a number of reasons why the debate over nuclear weapons will continue to require close attention from the international community.

REALISM AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

A predominant school of thought in looking at international conflict is that of realism. According to this view, states are rational, unitary actors working toward essentially the same ends. Like people, states are self-interested and seek to dominate others. Realists see the international system as one in which states exist as anarchic; meaning that there is no central authority with power above that of the states to which a state can appeal to for relief or protection. As a result, states exist in a system of self-help, which given the continual com-

petition among states requires each to provide for its own security and protect its interests as best it can (Russett and Starr 1996, 25).

With no one else to count on for protection, nuclear weapons are often seen as a powerful instrument of security enhancement. Few states are willing to encroach upon a nuclear state and risk provoking the devastating consequences of a nuclear confrontation. The destructive power alone of nuclear warheads is reason for concern as even small-scale use could result in future security considerations or in widespread repercussions in terms of destruction. The possibility of nuclear weapons proliferating, particularly to states plagued by instability and ongoing disputes, greatly increases the risk that even a minor conflict could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. Also, as the number of warheads increases, so do the possibilities of their use, whether through premeditated planning, false alarms, accidents, or nuclear terrorism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROLIFERATION

Since the introduction of nuclear weapons into the international system, the spread of nuclear capabilities has been limited to a small number of states. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, five states were known to possess a nuclear arsenal: the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China (Nye 1997, 187). In addition, Israel has been reputed to possess nuclear weapons since the 1970s, although the Israelis have not publicly acknowledged such claims (Cohen 1998, 51-52). With the end of the Cold War the incentives and possibilities for further proliferation of nuclear weapons have increased. As recently as May 1998 two more states, India and Pakistan, confirmed their inclusion into the number of nuclear states by testing nuclear devices.

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Israel, India, and Pakistan have begun testing nuclear devices largely out of security concerns. Israel is a small state surrounded by potentially hostile nations, while India and Pakistan have long-standing disputes with each other and fear the imperialistic intentions of China, another neighboring nuclear state. These states have, for the most part, advocated a no-first use policy with regard to their weapons. However, the presence of nuclear weapons and the continuing territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir, already the source of past wars between the countries, has fueled considerable international concern that a future conflict could escalate to a nuclear exchange. On a global scale, it is feared that as the number of states with nuclear weapons increases, so does the possibility of their use, particularly in the hands of states with questionable motives, such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, who are believed to be actively pursuing nuclear capability.

THE COLD WAR AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

THE COLD WAR STALEMATE

Since the United States ended World War II by dropping two atomic bombs on Japan, the problem of nuclear weapons has been one of the most debated and troublesome topics in the study of international relations. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 demonstrated the immense destructive power contained in a single nuclear warhead and signaled the beginning of a nuclear arms race, primarily between the United States and the Soviet Union. A prevalent fear throughout most of the Cold War was that a direct confrontation between the two superpowers would result in the use of nuclear weapons. From the 1970s onward, both superpowers possessed such large stockpiles of weapons that each had a "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) capability, meaning that either side could absorb an enemy attack and still have enough weapons to retaliate with a destructive nuclear strike of its own (Russett and Starr 1996, 277). In reality, by the end of the Cold War both superpowers possessed the capability of destroying each other many times over.

Despite the ideological differences between the United States and the Soviet Union, the superpowers shared a common interest in avoiding nuclear war. Due to the large stockpile of weapons that each country possessed, both the Soviet Union and the United States recognized that engaging the other in a direct confrontation risked the possibility of a nuclear exchange and considerable destruction on both sides. The resulting stalemate was often referred to as the "balance of terror" (Nye 1997, 120-123). The fear of being drawn into a direct confrontation helped temper the actions of the two superpowers during the Cold War and induced them to play a strong role in controlling the actions of subordinate states.

While the balance of terror played a role in maintaining the nuclear peace during the Cold War, other factors also contributed. With two superpowers with widely different ideolo-

gies, each served as an easily identifiable enemy for the other. In order to contain the other side's power, each superpower developed a sphere of influence over smaller states, with promises to provide protection and aid. Thus, the bipolar international system allowed many smaller states to align themselves under the protective umbrella, including the nuclear arsenal, of either the United States or the Soviet Union. The protection offered by the superpowers served as a surrogate for central authority in the international system and diminished the need of smaller states to pursue their own means of protection. The ability of powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union to influence the behavior of lesser states during the Cold War is no longer a reality in today's multipolar international system, due to increased parity among states and the lack of a clearly defined enemy against which to fashion a foreign policy.

Another important factor in maintaining the nuclear peace was the large buffer zone created by the distance between the two superpowers. This buffer zone allowed sufficient time to assess and respond rationally to a perceived threat. Unfortunately, there is no comparable buffer zone for states in the Middle East, or for neighbors such as India and Pakistan. The response time for a perceived threat in such circumstances might be extremely limited and could lead to less than rational decisions, particularly when nuclear weapons are an option in the face of an imminently perceived threat to security.

BEYOND THE COLD WAR: THE NEW INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Particularly since the end of the Cold War, the proliferation, or spread, of nuclear weapons to an increasing number of states in the international system has been an issue of great debate. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union played an active role in discouraging lesser states from the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Seen from the realist viewpoint, the protection offered by the superpowers effectively diminished the anarchic nature of the international system by allowing the superpowers to assume some of the burden otherwise borne by each state in providing for its own defense. The protection offered by the nuclear arsenal of each superpower significantly reduced the need of weaker states to pursue such weapons of their own.

However, with the end of the Cold War, a new international system emerged and with it has come increased concern over the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Rather than being a world of peace as some had suggested, the post-Cold War world had numerous conflicts and wars. The erosion of Cold War alliances, particularly within the former Soviet bloc, and the lack of an easily defined enemy decreased the ability of the more powerful states to influence the actions of lesser states. As many of the previous security arrangements lost significance, reliance on the superpowers for protection also decreased. In addition, the superpowers themselves are less willing and less able to provide the same level of protec-

tion as during the Cold War. Consistent with realist thought, as the self-help needs of the international system increased, states became more concerned about providing for their own security. Given the continual competition and perceived threats from others, and with few guarantees of protection from stronger states, nuclear weapons are perceived by some states as the ultimate guarantor of security (Nye 1997, 187).

CONFLICTING ARGUMENTS OVER PROLIFERATION

THE CASE FOR PROLIFERATION

Although there is considerable apprehension among realists regarding the possible consequences of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, it is not universally regarded as a reason for concern. Many analysts credit the possession of nuclear weapons as a key factor in preventing the Cold War from becoming "hot." The balance of terror between the United States and Soviet Union discouraged either side from introducing nuclear weapons into a conflict. Many hold that nuclear weapons will have a similar moderating effect in the future.

A number of analysts make a case for allowing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Some go so far as to say that the international system would be stable if *all* states had such weapons. The foremost among those who advance an argument in favor of proliferation is Kenneth Waltz (Russett and Starr 1996, 315), who argues that the gradual spread of nuclear weapons could actually promote peace and security. However, Waltz is careful to note that he supports a gradual spread of nuclear weapons rather than a rapid spread or no spread. As a realist, he recognizes that states will tend to security as they see best. However, due largely to the number of states, including Brazil, Argentina, and South Africa, that can produce nuclear weapons but have not, Waltz is doubtful of the likelihood of widespread proliferation (Nye 1997, 187). Based on this view, Waltz (1993) argues that, for the most part, states should be allowed to tend to their own security as they see fit, except in particular cases where the pursuit of nuclear weapons could lead to regional instability. The majority of states will continue to feel more secure without a nuclear arsenal. For other states, nuclear weapons would provide them with greater protection than conventional weapons and allow them to behave more reasonably (1993, 527, 552-554).

Due to the immense damage that can be caused by even a small number of nuclear warheads, the possible losses in a nuclear confrontation outweigh any possible gains. Given this, Waltz believes that the balance of terror that was so effective during the Cold War in preventing conflict between superpowers will likely continue to be a factor in the post-Cold War world. With the risk of a nuclear exchange making the possible costs of war extremely high, Waltz questions who would dare to start one. In addition, a nuclear state is more difficult (or is at least perceived to be more difficult) to defeat than is a state that does not possess nuclear weapons,

thereby reducing the incidence of war even further. With such a capability, Waltz believes that nuclear weapons may make a defensive, rather than an offensive, ideal possible. Finally, Waltz argues that states gaining nuclear capabilities in the present and future will have more incentives to manage their weapons responsibly since they will be more aware of the risks involved in a nuclear confrontation than were earlier nuclear states (1993, 554-555).

THE CASE AGAINST PROLIFERATION

Other realists are more skeptical about the possible consequences of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is widely feared that as more states possess nuclear warheads, the possibility of their use also increases. Lincoln Wolfenstein and Lewis Dunn are among those who oppose further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Wolfenstein (1996) takes an extreme argument by saying that nuclear weapons should not only be prevented from proliferating, but should be eliminated entirely from the world in order to eliminate the danger of nuclear disaster. He argues that as long as countries maintain large stockpiles of weapons, one cannot rule out the possibility of their use, whether accidentally or deliberately. He points out that the history of false alarms is not reassuring in this regard. In addition, nuclear weapons are generally seen as non-usable in most wars, which brings into question the deterrent value of such weapons. In support of his argument, Wolfenstein cites the Korean War and the Gulf War as conflicts in which nuclear weapons neither deterred war nor influenced the outcome (1996, 263-265). The mere possession of such weapons, however, carries with it the risk of even a small-scale conflict escalating to a nuclear exchange.

Dunn (1993) does not argue that there should be no nuclear weapons, but he is nonetheless concerned about the risks of nuclear weapons proliferation, particularly to conflict-prone regions such as the Middle East. Such a spread, coupled with high regional tensions, greatly increases the possibility that nuclear weapons will be used. Dunn is concerned that future nuclear states may include those with long-standing animosities, volatile leadership, or political instability, all of which heighten the risk that a miscalculation or breakdown in communications could threaten the nuclear peace (1993, 514-516). In addition, though third-world states that gain access to nuclear warheads may be well aware of the associated risks, there is a danger that such states would be deficient in both the technology and the resources to construct the extensive safety measures and devices adopted by the United States and the Soviet Union to reduce the threat of accidental or unauthorized use.

Dunn is also concerned that the possession, or likelihood of possession, of such weapons could exacerbate tensions between unfriendly states and risk drawing stronger states into a conflict between regional enemies. A threat to use nuclear weapons may be used as an instrument of blackmail or coercion against a weaker opponent. Another risk is a preventive strike, with either nuclear or conventional weapons, by a state

in order to preserve its regional monopoly on nuclear weapons and thus maintain a military advantage. An example of such action was Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981. There is also a risk of nuclear weapons being seized by a rebel or terrorist group to gain leverage over a state. In such a situation, a threat to use such weapons on civilian or strategic targets could greatly improve the group's bargaining power against a state and deter an attack against them (Dunn 1993, 514-516, 521-525).

THE MIDDLE EAST: PARADIGM OF THE NEW INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In looking towards the future of the post-Cold War world, the Middle East is a region central to the proliferation debate. The dynamics of this region, as seen from the realist perspective, make it a fitting paradigm of the international system as a whole and give added incentives for each state to provide for its own security. The Middle East is a volatile region and the proliferation of nuclear weapons would intensify the animosities within the region and increase the destructive potential of future conflicts.

Since World War II a number of wars have been fought in the region. Israel and several of the Arab countries in the region were involved in a several conflicts between the 1940s and 1970s, largely over issues of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. In the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq War lasted eight years and led countries in the region to support one side or the other based on their own security concerns: Saudi Arabia and Jordan, fearing Iranian revolutionary power, sided with Iraq, while Syria supported Iran out of concern over the rising power of neighboring Iraq. Israel also provided covert assistance to Iran since Iraq was perceived as a closer threat. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, most Arab states sided against Iraq in the Gulf War, due in part to the urging of the United States and the United Nations, but also out of fear of an increase in Iraq's power, particularly following such clear-cut aggression against a smaller state. In addition there are a number of ongoing territorial disputes in the region (Nye 1997, 152-155).

The long-standing animosity between the Arabs, Palestinians, and Israelis is an ongoing source of tension and violence in the region. Rather than minimizing the conflict, peace talks have repeatedly failed to achieve their aim. Aggressive and militaristic regimes and leaders in Iran and Iraq, states with a history of disregarding international norms, have worked toward building a nuclear capability for a number of years. In addition, numerous terrorist groups operate in the Middle East and have strong ties to regimes in the region, such as those of Iraq and Libya. There is considerable concern over what such groups would do with a nuclear arsenal at their disposal. Finally, the presence of Israel as a nuclear state is a cause for concern among its Arab neighbors (Van Ham 1993, 59-60).

Undoubtedly the most advanced military technology in

the region belongs to Israel, which is the only Middle Eastern state believed to have acquired nuclear capability, thus far. There is a strong belief throughout the world that Israel's nuclear arsenal consists of at least 200 weapons (Power 1995, 201). Nevertheless, Israel's use of these weapons is limited to some degree by its strong ties to the United States, from which much of Israel's technology comes, as well as a large amount of foreign aid annually. In addition, for at least the next several years, Israel will remain dependent upon U.S. early-warning systems for an alert against an incoming missile attack. It was largely due to urging from the United States that Israel did not attempt retaliatory strikes against Iraq for the Scud missile attacks on Israeli cities during the Gulf War (Inbar 1998).

Possession of nuclear weapons gives Israel the ultimate deterrent and, at least in the minds of Israelis, their best defense against any aggressive designs of its neighbors. From the realist standpoint, Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is understandable: it is a small state surrounded by a number of larger, antagonistic states, some of which seek to destroy the Israeli state altogether. A number of wars were fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors and there is a continual sense of apprehension in Israel over possible future threats, a mentality enhanced by the memory of the Holocaust. Part of the Israeli culture is now rooted in the conviction that nuclear weapons are vital to Israel's security and that no Arab nation should be allowed to possess a nuclear capability as they could threaten the very survival of Israel. The bombing of the Osiraq nuclear reactor was a demonstration of this latter conviction (Cohen 1998, 52-54; Feldman 1997, 104-105).

Although widely recognized as possessing nuclear weapons, Israel never publicly acknowledges such possession, following a policy referred to by Avner Cohen as "nuclear opacity" (1998, 51). This ambiguous nuclear policy serves Israel well by allowing the state's security to benefit in the face of its neighbors, and yet avoid the political and economic costs often incurred by states actively pursuing nuclear weapons. With regard to relations outside of the Middle East, Israel is able to largely avoid problems of international non-proliferation norms because the United States, a long-time ally, actively seeks to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other states in the region. Within the region, the purposeful ambiguity in Israel's nuclear policy has avoided actively encouraging any of its Arab neighbors to pursue a countervailing nuclear capability. Although Israel repeatedly insists that it would not be the first state to introduce nuclear weapons to the region, the inability of its neighbors to rule out the possibility of a retaliatory nuclear strike, even against a conventional weapons attack, undoubtedly tempers the actions and relations of a number of Arab states toward Israel (Feldman 1997, 96-98).

In addition to Israel, other states in the Middle East continue to pursue nuclear weapons of their own, particularly Iraq, Iran, and Libya, although the latter has scaled back its efforts in recent years. There is considerable international

concern over the motives of these states in seeking nuclear weapons due to their history of disregarding international norms, including suspected state-sponsored terrorism and ties to terrorist organizations. In addition, their largely authoritarian regimes and past aggressive behavior fuel the international community's commitment to prevent nuclear technology from proliferating to these states (Power 1995, 193). Although they cite self-protection, both against each other and against Israel, as a major reason for pursuing nuclear weapons, it is believed by many in the international community that these states do not seek such weapons primarily for defensive purposes. Rather, it is feared that nuclear weapons would serve more of an offensive purpose to threaten other states and assert themselves as the regional hegemon, as well as to extend their influence outside of the Middle East. These states are also considered more likely to be involved in the proliferation of nuclear technology to other countries. Subsequently, greater efforts—including economic sanctions, political pressure, and even the use of force—have been made by the international community, particularly the United States, to prevent these states from gaining a nuclear capability (Feldman 1997, 180).

With regard to Israel, a number of states in the Middle East perceive Israeli possession of nuclear weapons as destabilizing to the region and are concerned about the possible offensive use of such weapons or as a tool of political blackmail. In following with realist thought, a major motivation (or at least justification) for states such as Iran and Iraq to acquire nuclear weapons is to counter Israel's nuclear monopoly in the region and thus increase their own security. This mentality is further heightened by their perception of a discriminatory approach from much of the Western world that tolerates Israel's nuclearization while actively hindering similar pursuits by Arab states. In addition, these states are motivated by a desire to overthrow a sense of technological and cultural inferiority, particularly in light of Israel's technological accomplishments and efforts to maintain its nuclear monopoly in the region (Feldman 1997, 123-126).

The efforts by both Iran and Iraq to obtain nuclear weapons are propelled in part by each state's desire to assert itself as the region's hegemon, as well as by the fear of allowing the other to gain a military advantage. In light of such ambitions, particularly after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, an Arab state gaining possession of nuclear weapons would alarm not only Israel, but also other Arab states and could trigger an accelerated regional arms race and increase the risk of such weapons being used (Feldman 1997, 135-138).

From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, Iranian leaders expressed interest in obtaining nuclear weapons in order to protect their state against Iraq and Israel. Concern over Iran increased due to factors such as the existence of a secret military research unit and the importation of questionable nuclear goods and dual-use items. Concern was further heightened by Iran's testing of a long-range missile in

mid-1998. Some U.S. and Israeli sources have estimated that Iran could possess a nuclear-weapon capability within the next several years. Iran, however, holds that allegations about its alleged bomb-making intentions have been largely fabricated in an attempt to distract attention from Israel's bomb threat (Power 1995, 198-199).

In comparison with the attention given to Iran, the nuclear designs of Iraq are subject to an even greater amount of scrutiny. International weapon inspectors had made regular inspections of suspected Iraqi nuclear facilities since the end of the Gulf War in 1991 until 1998, when the operations were suspended. Looking back, it appears that the true extent of Iraq's nuclear program prior to the Gulf War was largely underestimated. Although Iraq would still have lacked the means to deliver the bomb, analysts now believe that when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the country was roughly two years away from producing an atom bomb with indigenous facilities. Although the allied bombings during the Gulf War and the subsequent weapon inspections set back the Iraqi nuclear program considerably, reports from weapon inspectors and Iraqi defectors lead many of the major powers and the United Nations to believe that Iraq is still on the nuclear path, prompting fear that Iraq could go nuclear after sanctions are lifted (Venter 1999, 45-50). This is a scenario that neither Iraq's Middle East neighbors nor the United States and its European allies want to face.

THE FUTURE OF PROLIFERATION

As an analysis of the dynamics of the Middle East can attest, there is no easy solution to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. As long as a self-help system exists, states will pursue policies they believe are best able to provide protection. Fortunately, there are a number of states that either do not have designs of acquiring a nuclear capability or are unlikely to have the resources necessary for such an undertaking in the foreseeable future. While not every country will pursue nuclear weapons, a number of states will see them as necessary, or at least desirable, particularly when a potentially hostile neighbor has a nuclear capability.

In reality, arguments for either complete disarmament or for universal proliferation are unrealistic. Due to the anarchic nature of the international system, which has only increased since the end of the Cold War, current nuclear states will be unwilling to risk compromising security by giving up all of their nuclear weapons. Coupled with the resources required for such an undertaking, particularly in the face of Russia's ongoing economic crisis, universal disarmament is not a viable option. Likewise, those who believe that universal proliferation would create a secure world are overly optimistic. The dangers inherent in an increasing number of nuclear states throughout the world are readily apparent in the risks posed by the tensions and dynamics present in the Middle East. Also, simple logic dictates that as the number of nuclear

weapons increases, so do opportunities for their use, whether by an accidental launch, premeditated planning, or terrorist attack. Such factors, particularly in the context of the post-Cold War world, make the possibility of a universal nuclear peace very unrealistic.

A more practical solution is to work on limiting the future proliferation of nuclear weapons and gradually reducing the number of nuclear armaments, although it is doubtful that the number will reach zero in the foreseeable future. Particular attention ought to be paid to prevent proliferation to states that would be more likely to use nuclear weapons for more than defensive purposes. One of the first steps is to reduce the self-help characteristics of the international system through confidence-building measures. Agreements for the non-use of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon-free zones (NFZs), such as those established in Latin America and the South Pacific, are one possibility (Van Ham 1993, 90). Efforts must also be made to encourage responsible handling and guarding of nuclear weapons, as well as improved safety measures for those weapons already in existence.

In the Middle East greater efforts must be made to overcome the mutual distrust, long-standing disputes, and continued hostilities that characterize the region. Until some progress is made in lessening the tensions associated with these problems, including some concrete steps towards peace between the Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians, any type of NFZ or arms-limiting agreement is unlikely to be realized, particularly given Israeli possession of nuclear weapons. Threats in the region could be reduced somewhat by measures to facilitate the peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes, although even limited measures of this type will not be easily agreed upon.

The question of nuclear proliferation is one of great concern for the present and future of international relations. Although realists disagree about the benefits and risks associated with the presence of nuclear weapons, the potential costs associated with any use of nuclear weapons is extremely high. The end of the Cold War introduced a new international system and altered many of the conditions that allowed the Cold War to preserve a nuclear peace. Given the characteristics of the post-Cold War world, particularly as highlighted by the dynamics of the Middle East, proliferation remains a real threat and one that requires continued attention. The international community, as well as individual states, must take an active approach to discourage the proliferation of nuclear weapons and promote confidence-building measures and peaceful dispute resolution.

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