

It's Time for a New Strategy for a New Nuclear Reality

Written by Todd Robinson

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TODD ROBINSON, MAR 20 2013

The recent revelation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) is significantly expanding their capability to enrich uranium,[i] which follows on the heels of the third and arguably most successful nuclear test conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK),[ii] signals a dramatic shift in the global landscape with regards to not only who possesses nuclear weapons, or the ability to produce nuclear weapons, but also in how the United States and its allies should approach the issue.

Based largely on the terms of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT, which laid out the so-called "grand bargain"[iii] between the nuclear have's and have nots (states who possessed nuclear weapons would be allowed to keep them for the immediate future, while those who did not would be entitled to the peaceful use of nuclear technology), the United States has, for several decades, been engaged in a strategy of what might best be called *targeted discouragement*. For states that they viewed as responsible, such as Germany, Japan, Australia, and the Netherlands, little would be said or done to discourage the development of any and all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, trusting that these states would never use this capability to produce nuclear weapons. Israel, even, would be allowed to develop one of the world's most robust nuclear weapons programs, as long as they agreed to abide by a policy of "strategic ambiguity"[iv]; one that continues to this day.

Conversely, states generally viewed as irresponsible, such as the DPRK, Iran, Iraq, Libya, would be strongly discouraged from developing nuclear technologies of any kind, regardless of whether they were signatories of the NPT. The rationale being that even the mere possibility that these states might develop nuclear weapons would represent a direct threat to the national security interests of the United States. This policy of discouragement also extended to states like India and Pakistan, even though they are, nor never have been, subject to the terms of the NPT.

This policy of targeted discouragement has led to the placement of economic sanctions,[v] the launching of cyber attacks,[vi] and even, it is alleged, the participation in, or tacit endorsement of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists.[vii] If the goal of this policy was to maintain the 1968 status quo, as one could argue, then the evidence suggests that it has been less than successful, if not an outright failure. If anything, this policy has led to more proliferation, not less.

The United States is at a crossroads. It can either continue to believe in, and make policy decisions based on the idea of a world where they can dictate who does and does not, or perhaps should or should not have the right to possess nuclear weapons or even the capability to produce nuclear weapons, or it can begin to realize that the world, and its role in it, has changed. Old alliances have ended or become irrelevant. Old actors have disappeared. States are increasingly forced to rely upon themselves. And, ironically, they look to the United States as an example of how to survive and prosper. If the United States still places value on the role of nuclear weapons in guaranteeing their security, why not follow their example?

Perhaps the new reality is really an old reality, in that states must increasingly look out for themselves. Instead of trying to discourage this behavior, perhaps the United States should instead adopt a policy that stresses the responsible use and possession of nuclear technologies, including weapons themselves. Such a policy, which might be described as one of *strategic encouragement*, would afford US policy-makers with the flexibility to still work

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towards a safer, more secure world, yet would also incorporate what has long been feared, but may now be inevitable, a world with more nuclear powers. Such a policy should stress the need for restraint in nuclear development, perhaps advocating for the minimum nuclear deterrence strategy adopted by such countries as China, India, and Pakistan.[viii] It should also stress the need for rigorous standards of command and control, which should not only seek to prevent nuclear related accidents and theft, but also the sale of nuclear weapons and weapon-making materials to known terrorist groups.

While it is necessary for US policy-makers to begin to change their thinking on this issue, it is also important for the United States to begin to reflect these policies internally, as well as externally. By acting responsibly, the United States will be able to encourage similar behavior from a position of strength, instead of one of hypocrisy.

Disarmament, for instance, must continue, whether it be in concert with the world's other nuclear states, or unilaterally. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) must, again, be brought up for ratification, even if the possibility of it entering into force remains miniscule. The US should even consider advocating for the amendment or abandonment of the NPT, moving instead to a framework that reflects the new nuclear reality, not the 1968 version of the world that the treaty is based on.

Secretary of State Kerry has signaled his willingness to engage in high level talks with Iran regarding their nuclear activities and ambitions. This may be the perfect opportunity to begin preparing for a world where many countries, including Iran, either possess nuclear weapons, or have the capacity to produce them in short order. Either way, the United States must begin to accept that a new nuclear reality is emerging and, with it, new challenges and opportunities.

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[i] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21537206>

[ii] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-test.html?_r=0

[iii] http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2003_12/Weiss

[iv] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/23/israel-nuclear-capability-strategic-ambiguity>

[v] <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/iran.aspx>

[vi] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html?pagewanted=all>

[vii] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/16/iran-scientists-state-sponsored-murder>

[viii] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/24/opinion/24schaub.html>

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