

The ME TOO Club

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At the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
five year review conference,
the silence was deafening as to why Iran and
North Korea might actually want nuclear weapons
... and what they might actually do with them.

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The "nuclear option" may have receded in the U.S. Senate for the time being. Unfortunately, it's still very much on the table for the two newest aspirants to the nuclear club. Not to mention those who already have their membership cards.

Iran and the EU3 (Britain, France, and Germany) essentially agreed to an atomic breathing spell in Geneva on Wednesday, May 25th. The EU3 committed to hold off on its stick (referring the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council) for at least a couple of months, and to define more precisely the carrots it might offer the mullahs. Iran pledged that it would continue to suspend its processing of nuclear materials - for now.

On the same day the Pentagon abruptly terminated a little-known agreement between Pyongyang and Washington that had permitted US officials to recover remains of US soldiers killed inside North Korea more than a half century ago. This followed warnings from US intelligence that North Korea might be on the verge, for the first time, of conducting a nuclear test. Some suggested that officials in Pyongyang would inevitably suspect that the US was laying the groundwork for a preemptive attack, and didn't want any potential hostages inside the country when it occurred.

Two days later, on Friday, May 27th, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) five year review conference at the UN came to a disheartening close - no new protocols, no new anti-nuclear strategies, no consensus about the road ahead. American representatives to the conference complained relentlessly about the nascent nuclear arsenals of Iran and North Korea (alleged by us in the first case, claimed by them in the second). Officials from much of the rest of the world, in concert with numerous non-governmental voices (including a large delegation of hibakusha - the aging survivors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima), directed their ire instead at the colossal and renascent nuclear firepower of the United States.

But virtually no one in Geneva or Washington or New York talked about the sober and rational motivations Iran and North Korea might possess for crossing the nuclear Rubicon, based on hard-headed calculations of their own perceived security needs. Virtually no one publicly admitted that these states might hold quite understandable reasons for invoking Article X - which allows a party to withdraw from the NPT if its "supreme interests (are) jeopardized" - as North Korea already has done and Iran eventually may well do. And virtually no one seemed to acknowledge that we may be witnessing the emergence of a new model of nuclear deterrence, one that will radically transform the 21st Century nuclear landscape.

During the Cold War's long atomic arms race, it became clear that nuclear weapons had little actual military value. It was difficult to conceive of any scenario where the benefits of employing a nuclear warhead could possibly exceed the almost infinite risks. Instead, nuclear arsenals came to be seen less as usable weapons, and more as a means to persuade others not to use weapons.

To some extent nuclear weapons discouraged conventional aggression. American military doctrine explicitly threatened to respond to Soviet tank divisions crossing the Elbe River in

Germany both by attacking those divisions with "tactical nuclear weapons" (an earlier generation of George Bush's oxymoronic "mininukes"), and by lobbing immensely more powerful strategic nuclear weapons directly onto Soviet soil. This is why American presidents, Democratic and Republican, always refused to commit to "no first use."

To accomplish this deterrent purpose, however, the US might need, oh, 70 invulnerable nuclear warheads or so. But during the Cold War the total number reached more than 70,000! We needed thousands of nuclear weapons, the argument ran, to dissuade our Soviet adversary from launching thousands of nuclear weapons against us. This, of course, was the logic behind the doctrine known as "mutually assured destruction," or "MAD" (surely the most appropriate acronym in history). As the Cold War ground on, it became apparent that the only rational purpose for nuclear weapons was to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others.

If Iran and North Korea acquire nuclear arsenals, their function for these regimes will be dramatically different. For Teheran and Pyongyang, the primary function of their nuclear weapons won't be to deter the use of someone else's nuclear weapons. Why not?

Because Iran and North Korea aren't afraid that the U.S. is going to attack them with nuclear weapons. Iran and North Korea are afraid that the U.S. is going to attack them.

Consider the outside world as viewed from Tehran and Pyongyang. George Bush delivers his 2002 State of the Union address, and singles out three countries as constituting an "axis of evil." He announces his intention to initiate unilateral and preemptive wars against nations that his Administration subjectively determines to be a potential threat. Defying almost universal world opinion, he actually starts such a war against one of the three, and succeeds in decapitating its regime, killing its leader's sons, and driving that leader himself into a pathetic hole in the ground. In the case of Iran, he surrounds it on all sides with bristling American military power -- Iraq to the west, Afghanistan to the east, enormous new US bases in Central Asia to the north, and the unchallengeable US Navy in the Persian Gulf to the south. In the case of North Korea, he adamantly refuses to offer the non-aggression pledge that Pyongyang has repeatedly requested. And even when he tries to offer reassurances he only exacerbates fears. "This notion that the U.S. is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous," he proclaims, only to immediately follow with "that being said, all options are on the table."

Does it occur to anyone in the bowels of the Bush Administration that these statements and actions might clash with their accompanying insistence that these two nations engage in immediate unilateral disarmament?

Iran and North Korea, of course, cannot hope to take on the United States in a direct military confrontation. But they can aspire to deter what must seem to them to be the very real threat of American military attack. How? By developing the capability to vaporize an American military base or three abroad, or an American carrier group in the Indian Ocean or the Sea of Japan, or even an American city. And by holding out the possibility that they would respond to any assault by employing that capability immediately, before it becomes too late, following the venerable maxim: "Use them or lose them." (This, we have learned in recent years from now elderly former Soviet military officers who were on the ground during the Cuban missile crisis, is precisely what they were prepared to do with the nuclear warheads in their hands at the first hint of an American strike on Cuba.)

There is, of course, only one thing that can provide these two countries with the capability to inflict that kind of damage. Hint: it's not nuclear electricity.

Iran and North Korea don't need thousands of nuclear warheads to fulfill this deterrent purpose. They just need perhaps a couple of dozen, well hidden and well protected. American military planners might be almost certain that they could take out all Iranian or North Korean nuclear capabilities in a lightning "surgical strike." But "almost" isn't good enough. It is inconceivable that the anticipated benefits of an attack on Iran or North Korea could outweigh the risk of losing perhaps a million Americans - 3 times as many as during the long years of

WWII, 300 times as many as on 9/11 - in the blink of an eye, the snap of a finger, the single beat of a human heart. If these states can create enough uncertainty in the minds of a potential adversary about the possible catastrophic response to any attack, it will probably be enough to cause that adversary to pause indefinitely.

It is difficult, on the other hand, to imagine any circumstances in which American commanders would find it militarily necessary to employ nuclear weapons against Iran or North Korea. After all, the United States today spends more on its military power than all the other countries in the world put together - a situation probably unprecedented in all of world history. The US toppled the Iraqi regime in a few short weeks with conventional weaponry alone. (Securing the peace, of course, has been another matter - but no one has suggested that America's vast nuclear arsenal can do anything to help with that.) This is especially true of the US Air Force, which today can operate at will over most of the world with virtually zero risk to its aircraft or crews. If any country can exercise deterrence without having to resort to nuclear deterrence, it is us.

Hence we see one of the more delicious paradoxes of the embryonic new nuclear age. Iran and North Korea need nuclear weapons to deter the United States. The United States doesn't need nuclear weapons to deter Iran or North Korea. The country that has them doesn't need them. And the countries that need them don't have them. Perhaps. Yet.

The best way to dissuade Iran and North Korea from going down the nuclear highway is to assure them they have nothing to fear from us. Tell them we're not going to invade their countries. We're not going to seek to change their regimes. We're not going to launch preemptive, unilateral, illegal wars of aggression against them. We're not going to drive their leaders into spider holes of their own.

Oh, and it wouldn't hurt to mention that we also don't expect them to endure the nuclear double standard forever until the end of time. We don't envision a world with a few permanent "nuclear haves" and a great many permanent "nuclear have-nots." Just as we expect them to abide by their NPT obligation not to acquire nuclear weapons, they can expect us to take seriously our NPT obligation to eventually get rid of ours.

There have been, and are, of course, other forms of nuclear deterrence. India and Pakistan use their nuclear weapons to deter both conventional and nuclear attacks by the other. China never came close to amassing a nuclear arsenal like those of the US or the USSR (even today Beijing possesses fewer than two dozen warheads capable of striking the continental United States), yet its nuclear weapons still function as some kind of deterrent. (The greater deterrent to any American attack on China, however, surely remains MacArthur's admonition against a "land war in Asia" ... and our memories of such a war in Vietnam.) Britain and France, unsure that at the moment of truth the United States would risk New York to save Paris or London, felt the need to develop their own independent nuclear deterrents. And Israel refused to join the NPT because of its fear of continued Arab aggression - even though its bomb in the basement failed to deter the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

But the Big Story of the first 45 years of the nuclear age remains the blow-up-the-world-a-thousand-times-over atomic arms race between Washington and Moscow. And the new theory of nuclear deterrence as practiced by Iran and North Korea is likely to differ from that traditional Cold War model in several fundamental ways. In the old, it was one big superpower state deterring the other big superpower state. In the new, we have small states deterring a big state. In the old, nuclear weapons primarily deterred nuclear weapons. In the new, nuclear weapons primarily deter conventional aggression. In the old, the opponent's entire country was put at risk. (Our threat - and theirs in mirror image - was not just to obliterate Moscow, but hundreds of Soviet cities, and hundreds of millions of Soviet citizens.) In the new, a threat of far lesser magnitude is surely enough to act as a deterrent. (Iran and North Korea probably never will be able to threaten the United States with anything similar to that Cold War threat ... but probably they don't need to.) And in the old, it was felt that tens of thousands of nuclear weapons were necessary for an opponent to be effectively deterred. In the new, probably a few dozen well-protected warheads will be sufficient to do the job.

Another Cold War concept that never captured the public imagination quite like "MAD" - but that those madcap fellows known as "nuclear theoreticians" from time to time employed - was the simple one of "unacceptable damage." If a nation possessed the capability - even the possibility - of imposing unacceptable damage on an adversary in response to aggression, that adversary would be effectively deterred from undertaking any aggression.

This already appears to be the case with North Korea, since our military planners are uncertain as to whether Pyongyang has already succeeded in obtaining the bomb. No one is seriously proposing any kind of a military strike on North Korea, because of the mere possibility that before the entire country was annihilated it might succeed in getting even one nuclear missile off the ground - aimed at South Korea, Japan, a large US naval formation in the Pacific, or an American city on the west coast. Any of those would presumably qualify as "unacceptable damage."

Although "UD" hardly contains the rich acronymphomaniacal irony wrought by "MAD," Iran and North Korea may be the first states to base their national nuclear strategies solidly upon it. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that they will be the last.

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