

Nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation during the Cold War

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At first glance, understanding the dynamics of how nuclear weapons spread during the Cold War, and what was done to slow this proliferation, should not be difficult. Weren't nuclear weapons a threat to international stability, inducing widespread support for efforts to hem in this menace to world peace? The real story was not so simple. As scholars have long recognized, nuclear weapons influenced international politics in complex and often contradictory ways during the Cold War. On the one hand, atomic weapons have an enormous destructive power – the capacity to kill millions of people and destroy the fabric of civilized life. On the other, this weapon of terror, may have induced caution among the states that possessed them. Many analysts believe the prospect of mutual destruction prevented World War III, serving as a foundation for what John Lewis Gaddis famously labeled “the Long Peace.”¹

This dilemma was just one of many that policymakers, strategists, and outside observers wrestled with as they tried to understand the military and political purposes of such fearful weapons. These issues were never resolved during the Cold War, as analysts joined government officials in devising the most intricate, sophisticated military strategies for weapons they hoped would never be employed and believed had no meaningful battlefield purpose. These fears also inspired millions around the world to join grassroots, nongovernmental efforts to prevent the bomb from ever being used.

This essay explores the history of efforts to come to terms with the puzzles and tradeoffs involved in confronting nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation during the Cold War. Many of these dilemmas have still not been resolved. For example, scholars vigorously debate whether

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security*, 10 (Spring 1986), 99–142.

proliferation threatens global security or stabilizes international politics and prevents war. Questions persist as to the reasons why states attempt to acquire nuclear weapons, the leading explanations being security, prestige, or bureaucratic/organizational impulse. Disagreement continues over whether the bipolar structure of the international system during the Cold War encouraged or hindered nuclear proliferation. Perhaps most maddening, no one has been able to accurately predict the “who and when” aspect of proliferation. Forecasters have almost always been caught off guard by who did, and did not, enter the nuclear club. Fears of tipping points, nuclear dominoes, and proliferation epidemics have existed from the start of the nuclear age, with worry accelerating in recent years, despite the fact that there are far fewer nuclear powers today than anyone could have reasonably hoped for thirty or forty years ago. Similarly, fears of rogue states with atomic weapons and nuclear terrorism have worried policymakers since the earliest days of the atomic age.

As this chapter reveals, nowhere are these nuclear puzzles more challenging than in the area of non-proliferation policy. If nuclear proliferation should and can be stopped – not universally held beliefs, particularly in the earlier part of the Cold War – what were the best policies to achieve this goal, appeasement or force? Did it make sense to apply the same non-proliferation policy toward democratic, neutral Sweden as toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC)? These dilemmas were especially sharp when viewed through the contours of the Cold War alliance system. Arms-control advocates argued that global non-proliferation could only be achieved when states that already had nuclear weapons reduced and eventually eliminated their stocks of atomic weapons, avoided anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defenses, and promised never to use nuclear weapons first. Countries that were asked to forgo these weapons, however, demanded robust and credible protection from the superpowers’ nuclear umbrella in return for their abstinence. In the US case, providing extended deterrence to states like West Germany, Japan, and South Korea demanded strategic superiority and a willingness to craft military strategies based on the early and massive use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with the Soviet Union.

The most intriguing feature of non-proliferation, however, was that it became a shared goal of two bitter Cold War enemies, the United States and the Soviet Union. Moreover, they pursued it at the expense of, among others, their closest friends and allies. A West German official complained that US efforts to enlist the Soviet Union in non-proliferation lent to “concessions from the wrong side and to the wrong

address.”² This shared interest, however, proved so powerful that at times it trumped traditional Cold War rivalries, attitudes, and policies; it also provided much of the impetus to détente.

Nuclear non-proliferation and the early Cold War

In the early days of the Cold War, neither US nor Soviet officials pursued non-proliferation efforts with any vigor. In hindsight, their policies appear unsophisticated and unrealistic. Some American officials believed the United States could maintain its nuclear monopoly indefinitely, while others proposed preventative war against the Soviets before they acquired their own weapons. For their part, the Soviets saw disarmament proposals as a propaganda tool while engaging in espionage and a full-scale crash program to develop their own atomic bomb. Despite the terrible destruction brought by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the epoch-changing nature of these new weapons went largely unrecognized or misunderstood in official military circles during the first years of the Cold War.

There were attempts to regulate this fearsome new weapon, although it is difficult to gauge how serious these efforts were. In January 1946, the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) was created during the first meeting of the UN General Assembly. During this session, the United States submitted the Baruch Plan, based on the Acheson–Lilienthal Report, which proposed UN control of all uranium-235 and plutonium facilities, extensive monitoring in all member states, and eventually global disarmament. The Soviets responded on June 19, 1946, with what came to be known as the Gromyko Plan, which required the United States to disarm. The United States modified the Baruch Plan and President Harry S. Truman signed the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, which created the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and banned all sharing of nuclear technology and information, even with Britain.

Cold War tensions between the superpowers increased and even half-hearted disarmament and arms-control efforts were largely dropped. Members of the Western alliance were stunned when the Soviets tested an atomic device on August 29, 1949, and, less than four years later, developed a hydrogen, or thermonuclear, bomb. Britain tested its own nuclear device

² Matthias Peter and Harald Rosenbach (eds.), *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1966* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997), vol. II. “Notes of Ambassador Schnippenkoetter: Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NP),” September 7, 1966, Document 277.

in October 1952. The United States also continued to build its nuclear stockpile, a long moribund UNAEC was formally dissolved, and by the end of the Truman administration little hope existed for any bilateral or international effort to control the spread of nuclear weapons. The war on the Korean Peninsula generated new fears that atomic weapons could be used again.

US president Dwight D. Eisenhower's non-proliferation legacy was mixed at best. On December 8, 1953, Eisenhower announced his Atoms for Peace program, which envisioned the sharing of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes through international channels. Eisenhower's plan was criticized for its naïve belief that knowledge and technology provided to countries for their civilian nuclear efforts would not advance their weapons programs. While the United States provided civilian technology to dozens of countries, it did require most of them to adhere to safeguards and inspections. Most importantly, the Atoms for Peace program led to the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which monitors global proliferation to this day.

On the other hand, Eisenhower's defense strategy did not rule out the use of nuclear weapons in future military conflicts; in fact, the president believed general war was inevitable if the Soviets and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) clashed in Europe.³ As late as 1960, Eisenhower told Robert Bowie "we must be ready to throw the book at the Russians should they jump us." We would be fooling our allies and ourselves, Eisenhower continued, if "we said we could fight such a war without recourse to nuclear weapons."⁴ This view had implications for the spread of atomic weapons. As the historian Marc Trachtenberg has pointed out, Eisenhower not only did not discourage nuclear proliferation; he actively sought to share nuclear weapons with close NATO allies. The military strategy of massive retaliation called for immense and preemptive use of nuclear weapons if there was clear evidence the Soviet Union was planning to attack. This meant authorization for the use of US nuclear weapons was pre-delegated to non-American forces, including the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Eisenhower also strongly supported the European Atomic Energy Agency (Eurotam) and the so-called France–Italy–Germany (FIG) agreements to

³ See David Holloway's chapter in volume I.

⁴ "Minutes of Meeting between D. Eisenhower and R. Bowie," August 16, 1960, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993), vol. VII, 614 (hereafter, *FRUS*, with year and volume number).

advance nuclear cooperation in Europe. According to Trachtenberg, the administration's attitude toward nuclear sharing went beyond Britain and France to include the FRG.⁵

Fears that the FRG would gain access to nuclear weapons prompted both the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies to propose non-proliferation agreements for Europe. On November 17, 1956, the Soviet prime minister, Nikolai Bulganin, announced a comprehensive disarmament plan that required the destruction of all nuclear forces. After the United States rejected the proposal as propaganda, Bulganin proposed a less ambitious plan that prohibited nuclear weapons tests and created a collective security arrangement that included a nonaggression pact between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. On October 9, 1957, Poland's minister of foreign affairs, Adam Rapacki, proposed a nuclear-weapons-free zone for central Europe. Rapacki modified the proposal twice more in response to criticism from NATO, proposing a nuclear freeze and gradual reductions. The United States and its NATO allies rejected these proposals on the grounds they did nothing to counter the Warsaw Pact's superiority in conventional military forces, nor did they make any substantial progress toward German reunification. Soviet unhappiness about the FRG's increased access to nuclear weapons was one of the reasons that the Soviet premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev, initiated pressure on Berlin.⁶

Despite these proposals and tensions, it is surprising to see how little attention was paid to the issue of nuclear proliferation among journalists, academics, and strategists at that time. Most of the so-called "wizards of Armageddon" studied the effects of the strategic nuclear balance between the Soviet Union and the United States and spent very little time thinking about what was then called the "Nth country" problem. The so-called bomber and missile gap, the tradeoffs between nuclear and conventional forces, the fear of an arms race, the nature of strategic vulnerability, the requirements of deterrence, and the merits of different nuclear strategies occupied the time of policymakers and strategists.

While the strategic community was slow to understand the importance of nuclear proliferation, by the late 1950s and early 1960s profound changes in world politics were forcing policymakers to confront new nuclear challenges. US and Soviet officials began to recognize that their early, lackadaisical

⁵ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. 146–211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 246–47.

attitudes toward non-proliferation were no longer prudent. The question of who would and would not get access to nuclear weapons became an issue of fundamental importance, not only between the superpowers, but also within each alliance and the non-aligned world as well.

The road to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Prospects for effective global nuclear non-proliferation policies improved in the early 1960s. There were four reasons for this change. First, as Lawrence Wittner has shown in his path-breaking work, *Resisting the Bomb*, grassroots antinuclear groups gained popularity throughout the world. The development of thermonuclear weapons, and the dangers associated with nuclear testing, brought emerging environmental groups together with peace advocates to demand governments ban the bomb. Nongovernmental organizations in the West, as well as political leaders from the Non-Aligned Movement, were especially important in advocating a nuclear test-ban treaty.⁷ This grassroots, global antinuclear movement was to expand and increase its influence in the decades to come.

Second, the tense confrontations between the Soviets and Americans between 1958 and 1962, initially over the status of Berlin and culminating in the Cuban missile crisis, brought the world close to the first use of nuclear weapons since 1945. Approaching the nuclear precipice – the US secretary of state, Dean Rusk, called it “the most dangerous crisis the world has ever seen,” the only time when the nuclear superpowers came “eyeball to eyeball” – both the Soviets and the Americans recognized the need to reduce tensions, halt arms racing, and limit the chances of an accidental nuclear war.⁸ A world with fewer nuclear weapons and fewer atomic powers, it was thought, would be much safer. Both governments increasingly made bilateral and global nuclear-arms control a priority after the October 1962 missile crisis. This led to the third factor – the idea that if proliferation was not stopped, there could be a domino, snowball, or tipping point phenomenon resulting in dozens of new atomic powers. President John F. Kennedy told the world in 1963 that he “was haunted by the feeling that by 1970, unless we are successful, there may be ten nuclear powers instead of four, and by 1975, fifteen or twenty.”⁹

⁷ Lawrence Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁸ See William Burr and David Alan Rosenberg’s chapter in this volume.

⁹ “President’s News Conference, 21 March 1963,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Kennedy* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1964), 280.

The fourth and most important reason for the shift toward stronger non-proliferation policies was geopolitical. Until the early 1960s, it could be argued that the countries that had developed nuclear weapons – the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France – were status quo powers, unlikely to change postwar borders through force. Other potential proliferators – Sweden, India, Australia, even Israel – had understandable (if controversial) security motivations to acquire weapons for defensive and deterrent purposes. However, two other potential nuclear powers, the FRG and PRC, fell into a much different category. The possibility that either or both of these states would gain access to nuclear weapons threatened the stability of Europe and East Asia and challenged both American and Soviet interests.

The FRG was a divided land, only a generation removed from the Nazi legacy of terror and war, feared by its Eastern bloc neighbors, and mistrusted even by its closest European allies. The FRG demonstrated an interest throughout the 1950s in having access to the most modern weapons available.¹⁰ Policymakers in the United States worried about the political consequences of openly discriminating against West Germany, especially when Britain and France were atomic powers. The efforts to make the FRG feel it could participate in nuclear decisionmaking, without actually giving them the bomb, created much anxiety in both the East and the West. Even more alarming to the Soviets, as we have seen, was the attitude of President Eisenhower, who believed that a nuclear-armed FRG was inevitable.

The German question was at the heart of almost all discussions over what to do about nuclear proliferation. As the 1960s progressed, most everyone came to believe that the FRG could not be allowed to possess its own nuclear weapons. The Berlin crisis made it quite clear that the Soviets would simply not stand for a nuclearized Bundeswehr. In the words of a US official, “German national nuclear capability is virtually a Soviet obsession, based upon a deep-seated emotional fear of resurgent German militarism.”¹¹ Could the United States, however, tell the FRG it could never have the most modern weapons, while neighbors France, Britain, and the Soviet Union continued to build their stockpiles? How would the Germans react when smaller or less economically advanced countries like Israel and India attained nuclear status and the security and respect that came with it? US officials, like

¹⁰ Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, 232–38.

¹¹ “The Value and Feasibility of a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” December 12, 1964, p.14, box 2, Committee on Non-Proliferation, National Security Files (NSF), National Security Council (NSC), 2, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, University of Texas, Austin, Texas (hereafter, LBJL).

Under Secretary of State George Ball, realized it was not “safe to isolate Germany or leave it with a permanent sense of grievance,” which could result from “her forced exclusion from the nuclear club.” Such policies, Ball noted, “would provide a fertile ground for demagogues.”¹² Ball and others proposed nuclear-sharing schemes such as the multilateral force (MLF) that they believed would satisfy West German needs.¹³ Others believed the MLF would only encourage the FRG’s nuclear ambitions. Resolving this dilemma – preventing a German national nuclear force without awakening dangerous resentments – created a great political struggle, both within the NATO alliance and between the United States and the Soviet Union.

At least the FRG was a liberal democracy. China was in many ways the original rogue state. Veering between the ironclad rule of Mao Zedong and the anarchy of the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, China’s successful program to develop its own atomic weapons worried its neighbors and both Cold War superpowers. China, with a population of more than 700 million by the early 1960s, had already fought the United States in Korea, attacked India, and threatened Taiwan, Indochina, and Indonesia. The PRC’s emerging nuclear status threatened the US position in East Asia and could affect the escalating conflict in Vietnam. President Kennedy had considered a nuclear-armed China a grave threat that would “so upset the world political scene [that] it would be intolerable.”¹⁴ In November 1962, US national security adviser McGeorge Bundy said that Chinese nuclear weapons would be “the greatest single threat to the status quo over the next few years.”¹⁵ Mao’s internal policies had led to the death of millions of his own citizens, and he had already declared that he did not fear nuclear war with the United States: “If the worse came to the worst and half of mankind died, the other half would remain while imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become

¹² Couve de Murville, Charles Lucet, George Ball, and Charles Bohlen, “Memorandum of conversation,” December 2, 1964, box 7, lot 67D2, RG 59, US National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, USNA).

¹³ The multilateral force, or MLF, was a US proposal, originally floated by the Eisenhower administration, and taken up with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, to produce a fleet of surface ships and submarines manned by international NATO crews and armed with ballistic nuclear missiles.

¹⁴ William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to Strangle the Baby in the Cradle: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security*, 25 3 (Winter 2000), 54–99.

¹⁵ “Memorandum from M. Bundy to J. Kennedy,” November 8, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, vol. VII, 598.

socialist.”¹⁶ From the US perspective, a nuclear-armed PRC could become even more aggressive and harder to deter. According to one analyst, the Chinese appeared “determined to eject the United States from Asia” and were sure to “exploit their nuclear weapons for this end.” By 1970, China would have “thermonuclear weapons,” and by 1980, “it [would] be necessary to think in terms of a possible 100 million U.S. deaths whenever a serious conflict with China threatens.”¹⁷ China’s attitude toward the Soviet Union was hardly better, as the bitter rhetoric between these ideological and geopolitical competitors threatened to spill over into conflict throughout the 1960s. Tensions grew so heated between these former allies that by 1969, the Soviet Union contemplated a “pre-emptive strike” against China’s nuclear forces.¹⁸

Concerns about West Germany and China motivated the Soviet Union and the United States to seek a common stance in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. The Kennedy administration began distancing itself from Eisenhower’s willingness to share nuclear weapons within NATO. Secretary of State Rusk told Khrushchev, “the Germans should not have a national nuclear capability.”¹⁹ Kremlin leaders, of course, concurred. An FRG with nuclear weapons was a grave threat to their interests in Europe. Moreover, they shared a long and often disputed border with China. As relations with the PRC deteriorated, they faced the possibility of nuclear-armed adversaries on two fronts. Furthermore, most prospective proliferators were in the Soviet Union’s near abroad, in East and South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The superpowers had compelling reasons to cooperate on nuclear non-proliferation.

They also increasingly recognized that uncontrolled nuclear proliferation offered challenges that went beyond traditional geopolitical concerns such as China and Germany. By the mid-1960s, nuclear experts sensed that major powers, such as the United States and the Soviet Union, understood the responsibilities of nuclear ownership and recognized the deadly logic of mutual vulnerability and deterrence, but they wondered whether the same

¹⁶ Mao Zedong, “We Must Not Fear Nuclear War,” as cited in Richard Wyn Jones, *Security, Strategy, and Critical Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999), 137.

¹⁷ “China as a Nuclear Power (Some Thoughts prior to the Chinese Test),” October 7, 1964, box 5, Committee on Non-Proliferation, NSF, NSC, LBJL.

¹⁸ See William Burr (ed.), National Security Archive Briefing Book, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969: U.S. Reactions and Diplomatic Maneuvers*, June 12, 2001, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/.

¹⁹ “Record of D. Rusk and N. Khrushchev Meeting,” August 8, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, vol. XV, 567.

would hold for smaller, less developed countries, or even non-state actors. In 1965, analyst Fred Iklé warned that if proliferation went beyond the “middle powers,” it could lead to “owners of nuclear weapons who cannot be deterred because they feel they have nothing to lose.” These might include a group “fanatically dedicated to some revolutionary cause which may have no concern for the survival of their country … To carry out such ‘nuclear anarchism’ or acts of personal revenge, modern delivery systems would not be needed; it would suffice if the weapons could be sneaked close enough to a target clandestinely.”²⁰ A study led by Thomas Schelling in 1963 argued that the future would hold complex or unforeseen nuclear threats. “(N)uclear weapons will become increasingly economical for smaller countries to produce” and may become available by “theft, commercial purchase, or diplomatic trading.” These new nuclear powers would not need sophisticated strategic forces or ballistic missiles. “A fishing boat or a cheap airplane might have been an adequate means of delivery for, say, the Algerian Nationalists against Marseilles, or Castro’s Cuba against Baltimore or Miami.”²¹

The Soviet Union and the United States had to overcome significant barriers before they could negotiate a nuclear non-proliferation policy, and they moved slowly at first, building upon earlier international efforts. In 1961, Ireland proposed a UN resolution, the Prevention of the Wider Dissemination of Nuclear Weapons, which banned the spread of nuclear technology to additional states and prohibited all countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. In 1962, the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) was formed to encourage the Soviet Union and the United States to adopt arms-control measures. A year before, President Kennedy created a new agency, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) headed by William Foster, and the same year named John McCloy as his special adviser on disarmament. McCloy negotiated a set of arms-control principles with his Soviet counterpart, Valerian Zorin, in September 1961. The McCloy-Zorin principles, as they were called, built upon the efforts of others such as British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, to pave the way for serious negotiations to ban nuclear testing.

The Soviet Union, United States, and Britain negotiated a Limited Test-Ban Treaty that was opened for signature on August 5, 1963. The treaty was not

²⁰ Fred C. Iklé, “Possible Consequences of a Further Spread of Nuclear Weapons,” January 2, 1965, box 7, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, NSF, NSC, LBJL.

²¹ “A Report on Strategic Developments over the Next Decade for the Interagency Panel”, October 1963, 51–53, box 376, NSF, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter, JFKL).

perfect. The Soviets and Americans disagreed about the number and types of inspections that would be allowed, and underground tests were not banned. Nothing was done about China's emerging nuclear program. More ambitious arms-control measures, such as a comprehensive test ban or limitations on the growth of strategic weapons, were beyond the reach of the superpowers for the time being.

The Limited Test-Ban Treaty, however, was a good start toward the goal of a global non-proliferation regime, and its timing was propitious. By the mid-1960s, several developed and developing states were considering or actually constructing active nuclear weapons programs. In Europe, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, Yugoslavia, and even Romania were seen as candidates for the bomb. It was speculated that Brazil, Argentina, and perhaps Mexico were motivated to develop atomic weapons as well. Regional arms races in the Middle East and South Asia were feared if Israel and India successfully tested a weapon. China's capabilities and the conflict in Vietnam made East Asia fertile soil for new nuclear powers, such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, and even Australia.²² There was great concern that China's test – which took place in October 1964 – could initiate a nuclear domino effect if vigorous action were not taken.²³ Not only might this destabilize key regions of the globe by initiating local arms races; the increased number of smaller states acquiring nuclear weapons could put pressure on West Germany to follow suit.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signaled a renewed US commitment to non-proliferation on January 21, 1964, in a message to the ENDC calling for a worldwide treaty based on the Irish resolution. Real movement on the policy front, however, did not come until exactly one year later, when the blue ribbon Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, or Gilpatric committee, delivered its findings to the White House. This committee of influential officials had been put together to construct a new US non-proliferation policy in the wake of the PRC's atomic test in October 1964. The group explored a broad menu of alternatives. On the one hand, it considered the consequences of accepting or even aiding nuclear proliferation. At the other end of the spectrum, the group weighed the implications of a far tougher non-proliferation policy. The committee examined a wide range of policies,

²² R. Murray, "Problems of Nuclear Proliferation Outside Europe," December 7, 1964, Document #CK3100281620, 1, Declassified Documents Reference System (hereafter, DDRS), www.columbia.edu.

²³ Henry Rowen, "Memorandum – India's Nuclear Problem," December 24, 1964, Document #CK3100154493, DDRS.

including appeasement, sanctions against emerging nuclear powers, preemption against the PRC, and even sabotaging French nuclear-testing sites.²⁴

There were divergent views within the US government, including skepticism in some quarters about whether nuclear non-proliferation was even desirable. State Department official George McGhee suggested in 1961 that it would be advantageous “if a friendly Asian power beat Communist China to the punch” by testing a nuclear device first, and there was “no likelier candidate than India.”²⁵ Dean Rusk argued that it “was easy for the U.S. to speak out against proliferation, but the Prime Minister of India or Japan must look on the question quite differently.” For the secretary of state, “non-proliferation [was] not the overriding element in U.S. relations with the rest of the world.”²⁶ A briefing paper for the Gilpatric committee wondered if it was in “the U.S. interest in all cases” to prevent other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons, “or might it be in the U.S. interest for particular nations to acquire such capability?”²⁷

The committee, however, concluded, “preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons is clearly in the national interest, despite the difficult decisions that will be required.” The report “as a matter of great urgency” recommended the administration “substantially increase the scope and intensity” of its non-proliferation efforts. “The world is fast approaching a point of no return in the prospects of controlling the spread of nuclear weapons.” A program that included formalizing multilateral agreements, applying pressure on individual states considering nuclear acquisition, and making changes to the United States’ own policies was recommended.²⁸

In order to implement the committee’s recommendations, controversial policies would have to be adopted. The Soviet Union would have to be accepted as the key partner in a global effort to stem the spread of atomic weapons. A comprehensive test-ban treaty and regional nuclear-free zones would have to be supported. Nonnuclear powers would have to be given something in return for their pledge to abstain from acquiring nuclear

²⁴ Roger Fisher, “Memo on Possible Action: Action Directed against Further French Atmospheric Tests,” December 19, 1964, box 10, Personal Papers of Roswell Gilpatric (hereafter, PPRG), JFKL.

²⁵ “Memorandum from G. McGhee to D. Rusk,” September 13, 1961, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Files, India, National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

²⁶ “Secretary’s Meeting with the Gilpatric Committee on Non-Proliferation,” 7 January 1965, box 24, lot 67D2, RG 59, USNA.

²⁷ Untitled memo, box 5, Committee on Non-Proliferation, Selected Issues, NSF, LBJL.

²⁸ “Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation,” January 21, 1965, Box 8, NSF, LBJL.

weapons. Neutrals like India would have to be offered some form of guarantee against nuclear attack. Japan would have to be reassured. Israel's and Egypt's nuclear ambitions would need to be confronted. Carrots and sticks would have to be employed both to appease and deter potential proliferators. On the most controversial question of all, the status of the MLF and its relationship to West Germany's nuclear ambitions, the committee was divided. Most of its members understood, however, that the MLF would have to be sacrificed to obtain the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with the Soviet Union.

The Gilpatric committee's conclusions were controversial, especially among those in the US State Department who supported the MLF. Secretary of State Rusk argued the report was as "explosive as a nuclear weapon" and worked to keep it secret. President Johnson, however, strongly supported the group's recommendations, and the thrust of the committee's findings became official US non-proliferation policy when Johnson approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 335, "Preparation of Arms Control Program." The policy built upon the president's speech celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations, where he had called upon other governments to join the United States to negotiate "an effective attack upon these deadly dangers to mankind." With NSAM 335, Johnson ordered a program to halt the further spread of nuclear weapons. He assigned the task to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and gave it direct access to the White House, an arrangement that signaled Johnson's keen interest and that prevented the State Department from sabotaging the effort.²⁹

The United States submitted a draft non-proliferation treaty to the ENDC on August 17, 1965. The Soviet Union made its own proposal to the UN General Assembly on September 24, 1965. The proposals were similar except for one key provision – how they viewed collective nuclear forces such as the MLF or the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). While the US proposal allowed for the MLF, the Soviet plan prohibited nonnuclear-weapon states from participating in "the ownership, control, or use of nuclear weapons." The Soviet draft even challenged the right of nonnuclear states in an alliance to participate in nuclear planning and targeting. Soviet and American negotiators wrestled over the precise language governing US–NATO nuclear arrangements for almost two years. The difficulty of these negotiations surpassed only the problem both superpowers had in convincing their alliance partners and neutrals to embrace the treaty.

²⁹ "National Security Action Memo 335: Preparation of Arms Control Program," June 28, 1965, www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/archives.hon/NSAMs/nsam335.asp.

A non-proliferation treaty faced great challenges, particularly within the Western Alliance. Japan expressed grave concerns about the PRC's nuclear status and indicated it was interested in its own atomic weapons. Britain was adamant that there must be a treaty at any cost, even if it jeopardized the FRG's interests. France's position was most vexing. De Gaulle did not believe that states could be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons if they really wanted them, and he did not support the treaty. On the other hand, France was adamantly opposed to the possession of nuclear weapons by the FRG. Furthermore, de Gaulle supported the Soviet position on the MLF and did whatever he could to undermine the scheme.

The West Germans were not pleased with the renewed focus on their intentions in the nuclear field. Hadn't the FRG already promised, West German officials complained, not to produce atomic, biological, and chemical weapons in the Paris Accords of 1954? Why should the FRG, its leaders asked, sign an agreement without something tangible from the Soviets in return? The FRG was bitterly disappointed that none of her "allies" were making an effort to link non-proliferation to a European settlement beneficial to Germany. Furthermore, West Germany had an emerging civilian nuclear sector, and it did not want to see an NPT harm its economic interests in this area.

The pressure to terminate talks regarding the MLF and to accept the NPT, combined with clashes over military and international monetary policy, brought US-West German relations to a low point in the late 1960s. The new chancellor of the FRG, Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, accused the United States of "complicity" for its overtures to the Soviets on the NPT.³⁰ The former chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, publicly called the NPT proposals "the Morganthau Plan squared." The FRG's attitude toward the NPT threatened a crisis between the blocs and within NATO.

Though less well known, the Soviet Union had its own difficulties with socialist countries over the issue of nuclear proliferation, resulting in similar alliance tensions. On January 17, 1955, the Council of Ministers of the USSR authorized the sharing of peaceful nuclear technology with its allies. The Soviets offered nuclear technology and information, including research reactors, to Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and even Egypt. The most important beneficiary of this policy, however, was China. In exchange for Chinese exports of uranium, the Soviets provided more than 10,000 experts, technical drawings,

³⁰ "Conversation between the Federal Chancellor Kiesinger and the American Special Envoy McCloy," March 4, 1967, Document 87, *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1967*.

and refined fuel. This aid is estimated to have expedited China's weapons program by ten to fifteen years.

This program was abruptly ended in the late 1950s, as relations between Russia and China deteriorated.³¹ In addition, promises to improve Hungary's and Czechoslovakia's atomic energy programs were not fulfilled. Khrushchev's concerns about China's military prowess and aggressive intentions created another source of tension with his allies. As the historian Douglas Selvage has shown, in 1963 and 1964 the Soviet leader was willing to accommodate American desires for the MLF plan in order to achieve an NPT aimed at China. Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, were furious. They insisted that the NPT must guarantee the FRG's nonnuclear status. The Soviets heeded these concerns and once again made eliminating the MLF a key goal of an NPT.³²

The MLF issue and the looming appearance of new nuclear powers gave the non-proliferation question a sense of urgency throughout 1966. The evidence indicated both India and Israel would expand their efforts to build nuclear weapons in the absence of a global regime. While it was clear that the Soviets wanted a nuclear NPT, it was just as clear they would not accept an arrangement that allowed for a meaningful MLF. In the fall, negotiations intensified, with Gromyko and Rusk struggling to find compromise language that prevented the transfer of nuclear weapons to individual states but allowed for individual European national programs to be folded into a single larger European scheme. The United States wanted to protect existing US–NATO nuclear arrangements and allow for the creation of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).

A rough understanding between the Soviets and the Americans on treaty language and interpretation emerged during the winter of 1966/67. That did not mean, however, that a working treaty agreeable to all major powers was in sight. The West Germans continued to object to an NPT on a number of grounds, and demanded revision of key articles. The so-called Gaullist wing of the new government, led by Finance Minister Franz-Josef Strauss, dismissed the treaty as a "Versailles of cosmic proportions."³³ Disagreements over the

³¹ See Sergey Radchenko's chapter in this volume.

³² Douglas Selvage, "The Warsaw Pact and Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1963–1965," Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 32 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001).

³³ Shane Maddock, "The Nth Country Conundrum: The American and Soviet Quest for Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1945–1970," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut (1997), 501.

inspection and safeguard regime, peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and the length of the treaty were sticking points for a number of countries. The non-aligned nations highlighted other problems with the treaty and demanded that the United States and the Soviets offer security guarantees, reduce their nuclear stockpiles, and direct the savings into economic aid for the underdeveloped world. These disagreements proved time-consuming and contentious. Negotiations dragged on throughout 1967 and the first half of 1968.

The superpowers were joined by sixty-two other states, giving preliminary approval to the NPT, when it was signed on July 1, 1968. The Johnson administration hoped for rapid ratification, both domestically and internationally, but the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 undermined those hopes. The US Senate voted in October 1968 to delay ratification, and key countries such as Italy, Israel, and the FRG refused to sign the treaty. As Richard M. Nixon succeeded Johnson as US president, the fate of the NPT was uncertain.

The Nixon administration was ambivalent toward both the NPT and the issue of nuclear proliferation in general. A briefing paper for Nixon argued that there were cases where “independent nuclear weapons capability might be desirable.”³⁴ A National Security Council (NSC) memo pointed out that, regarding the NPT, the “problems with the FRG are understated.”³⁵ A Kissinger aide claimed that “Henry believed that it was good to spread nuclear weapons around the world” and argued Japan and Israel would be better off with atomic weapons.³⁶ The president himself argued “treaties don’t necessarily get us very much” and if countries wanted to “make their own weapons,” they could “abrogate the treaty without sanction.”³⁷ In the end, while the United States would continue to support the treaty, Nixon made it clear that he would “not pressure other nations to follow suit, especially the FRG.”³⁸

Despite this ambivalence, the Nixon administration formally presented the NPT to the US Senate for advice and consent on February 5, 1969. After a vigorous internal debate and the victory of Willy Brandt’s Social Democratic

³⁴ “Summary of NPT Issues Paper,” January 28, 1969, 1–2, box H-019, NSC Meetings File, Nixon Presidential Materials Project (NPMP), USNA (materials moving to Yorba Linda, California).

³⁵ “Memorandum: H. Sonnenfeldt to H. Kissinger,” January 27, 1969, box 366, NSF, NPMP, USNA.

³⁶ Maddock, *The Nth Country Conundrum*, 523.

³⁷ “Minutes of the National Security Council,” January 29, 1969, 6, box H-12, NSC Draft minutes, NPMP, USNA.

³⁸ “List of Actions Resulting from Meeting of the National Security Council,” January 29, 1969, box H-019, NSC Meetings File, NPMP, USNA.

Party in national elections, West Germany signaled its intention to sign the treaty in November 1969. The last major hurdle was cleared for both the United States and the Soviet Union to sign, and both superpowers deposited the treaty on March 5, 1970.

The simple act of negotiating and signing a treaty did not, in itself, end the threat of nuclear proliferation. There were immediate setbacks. The Nixon administration did not make non-proliferation a priority. Israel's burgeoning weapons program was ignored, as were South Africa's nascent efforts. US-French nuclear cooperation was resumed. Western European companies offered advanced nuclear technology to potential proliferators, including Argentina, Brazil, and Pakistan. India detonated a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974, triggering considerable protest but few sanctions.

In spite of these problems, nuclear proliferation began to slow. Many potential proliferators suspended their weapons programs, and Japan, Australia, Sweden, and Egypt, among others, did not go nuclear as had been feared. Significantly, the complex and difficult NPT discussions helped spur other important arms-control negotiations. The Johnson administration pursued the so-called Outer Space Treaty, banning the militarization of space.



28. In May 1974, India became the second Third World country, after China, to successfully test a nuclear weapon. Here Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi visits the testing sites in Rajasthan. She is flanked by the defense minister, Krishna Chandra Pant (left), and Homi Sethna, chairman of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission (right).

The first regional nuclear-free zone was established in Latin America through the Treaty of Tlatelolco in February 1967. Strategic arms-control talks were initiated between the Soviet Union and the United States during the summer of 1968, culminating in Nixon and Brezhnev signing treaties in Moscow on May 26, 1972, limiting both strategic offensive and defensive nuclear weapons. While challenges remained, there was no denying the extraordinary shift in policies and attitudes against the horizontal and vertical spread of nuclear weapons that had taken place in little over a decade.

Proliferation puzzles

How did the new emphasis on non-proliferation influence Cold War global politics? And how effective was the NPT in slowing the spread of nuclear weapons? In the years since the treaty was signed, many critics have emerged and have pointed out the treaty's weaknesses. According to them, the original treaty did not create a rigorous enough inspections regime. Given the hopes for peaceful uses of atomic energy, not enough was done to recognize how easily civilian projects could be turned into weapons programs. Further, the treaty was inherently discriminatory, particularly against countries outside of the Cold War alliance system. The superpowers were not held to their promise to reduce their nuclear arsenals and to plan for their eventual elimination. Little was done to sanction new nuclear countries, such as Israel and India.

US non-proliferation policy was often a target of sharp criticism. Close allies, like West Germany, Taiwan, and South Korea, chafed at the pressure applied on them to forgo weapons, while other geopolitical interests seemed to cause the United States to overlook Israel's and Pakistan's efforts. Although few experts fully accepted the logic of Kenneth Waltz's argument that "more may be better," many observers in the United States argued that the robust nature of nuclear deterrence made undue attention to nuclear proliferation misguided. Even after the Cold War, the United States has been unwilling to deemphasize the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. While countries including India, Russia, Israel, and even China have moved toward full or modified promises to eschew the first use of nuclear weapons, the United States still maintains its right to do so if it sees fit. These and other positions have caused critics to argue that US nuclear strategy undermined the goal of nuclear non-proliferation.

What they ignore is how difficult it is to construct an effective global nuclear non-proliferation regime that is not riddled with puzzles and

paradoxes. As a 1964 Hudson Institute report explained, “retarding the spread of nuclear weapons” is a process where “the best may be the enemy of the good.” The study continued, an “attempt to get ‘everything’ may risk achieving substantially less than it would be possible with more modest ambitions.”³⁹ Most everyone believed that nuclear non-proliferation was an admirable principle. But constructing policies that generated worldwide support for it was difficult. How could states be convinced to forgo the perceived prestige and national security advantages that came with becoming a nuclear power?

What the critics have failed to fully understand is that any successful nuclear non-proliferation policy would be burdened with paradoxes and contradictions. Consider the US position toward nuclear strategy, non-first use, and anti-ballistic missile defenses as it related to its efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation among its allies. On the one hand, the United States needed to emphasize “the political unattractiveness of nuclear weapons, to convince populations that they are ugly, dirty, immoral, illegal, dangerous, sickening and not very useful.” On the other hand, US policies undermined this message. “As one US expert noted at the time, having a nuclear sub visit Tokyo is like bringing a shiny new motorcycle home to show it off to your teenage son, while trying to convince him that he doesn’t want one.”⁴⁰

From Japan’s perspective, however, the issue was not quite so simple. Japan was near two enemies who had nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union and China. If it was going to give up its own weapons, Japan needed a serious and credible commitment that the United States would protect it if attacked, even if it meant using nuclear weapons. This commitment could hardly be credible in the face of much larger Soviet and Chinese conventional forces without a robust nuclear capability. According to this logic, if the United States reduced its nuclear forces, it might actually encourage proliferation. A smaller US strategic force increased the incentives for small countries to become a “first rank nuclear power.”⁴¹ To keep Japan nonnuclear, a “clearly superior US nuclear capability in Asia” had to be maintained.⁴² The United States also needed to be willing to use its nuclear weapons first to protect allies surrounded by nuclear adversaries that also had conventional military superiority.

³⁹ Hudson Institute, “Measures for Retarding the Spread of Nuclear Weapons: Proposal to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency,” March 13, 1964, 5, box 5, NSF, LBJL.

⁴⁰ R. Fisher to S. Keeney, November 5, 1964, Box 5, NSF, LBJL.

⁴¹ “Problems Concerning Alternative Courses of Action,” undated, 3, box 1, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, NSF, LBJL.

⁴² “Japan’s Prospects in the Nuclear Weapons Field: Proposed US Courses of Action,” June 24, 1965, box 24, lot 67D2, RG 59, USNA.

Deploying strategic missile defenses would also have uncertain effects on nuclear proliferation. Building an ABM system might accelerate an arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, a US ABM deployment could “decrease U.S. vulnerabilities to possible Chinese threats of attack and thereby enhance the credibility of our [US] commitments to Japan and other friendly nations.”⁴³ A limited ABM could be justified so that “those countries which fear the growth of Chinese nuclear capabilities should not feel that their only alternative is to create a costly nuclear arsenal themselves.”⁴⁴

In order to prevent proliferation, the superpowers had to guarantee allies and potential friends that they would come to their defense if attacked. Since few potential proliferators outside of the Eastern bloc were interested in any sort of guarantee from the Soviet Union, the burden fell upon the United States to craft military policies that would reassure countries such as Japan, West Germany, Australia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Taiwan that they could live safely within the new non-proliferation regime. This led to expensive deployments of forces abroad, and justified the buildup of US nuclear capabilities. Security guarantees, however, threatened to pull the United States into regional conflicts it might have otherwise avoided.

What about states that did not want or trust superpower security commitments? And what factors motivated states whose primary concern was *not* the Cold War – diverse countries ranging from Argentina to Sweden? Much more historical research remains to be done to fully understand why some states forgo nuclear weapons while others embrace them.

The Cold War nuclear proliferation legacy

Despite great progress, we still know less than we would like about why states develop nuclear weapons and what policies are most effective at preventing nuclear proliferation. As we have seen, efforts during the Cold War to halt the spread of atomic weapons pulled policy in different, often contradictory, directions. Despite some failings and continuing puzzles and paradoxes, however, a strong case can be made that the NPT was a watershed event in international affairs with two major consequences. Negotiated between two ideological enemies, the NPT was a key part, for better or worse, of the

⁴³ “Contingency Paper on the Arms Control Considerations of a U.S. ABM Deployment Decision,” August 25, 1967, box 231, Country File: USSR, NSF, LBJL.

⁴⁴ “Telegram from the Secretary of State to U.S. Embassy in Paris,” September 14, 1967, box 1, NSF, Committee File, LBJL.

stabilization of power politics that began with the Limited Test-Ban Treaty in 1963 and was fully manifested in the Helsinki Accords of 1975. This comes through clearly in the Gilpatric committee deliberations. Neither the Soviets nor the Americans alone could halt proliferation, but “both ha[d] much to lose” if “lesser powers” acquired nuclear capabilities. The Soviet Union and the United States had “multiple, overlapping interests” that suggested the “timeliness of early steps to achieve an essentially bi-polar entente, resembling the Concert of Europe, the informal coalition based on limited mutuality of interests that kept the peace in Europe for more than half of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁵ The need to stem nuclear proliferation brought these bitter enemies together and helped give rise to détente.⁴⁶

Equally important, the treaty made nuclear non-proliferation a shared value of the international community in the same way human rights, anti-terrorism, and maintaining a stable international economic order have come to be seen as globally shared interests. While hard to quantify, it is clear that this global norm has helped slow (and in some cases, reverse) nuclear proliferation over the past few decades. In 1961, the famous strategist Hermann Kahn claimed that with “the kind of technology that is likely to be available in 1969, it may literally turn out that a Hottentot, an educated and technical Hottentot it is true, would be able to make bombs.”⁴⁷ What is striking, however, is how wrong the predictions made by Kahn, President Kennedy, and others turned out. Writing in 1985, the National Intelligence Council noted that for “almost thirty years the Intelligence Community has been writing about which nations might next get the bomb.” While “some proliferation of nuclear explosive capabilities and other major proliferation-related developments have taken place in the past two decades,” they did not have “the damaging, systemwide impacts that the Intelligence Community generally anticipated they would.”⁴⁸ Over time, non-proliferation, and not nuclear possession, has developed into a well-respected global norm. We have witnessed an extraordinary shift in attitudes about nuclear weapons from the earliest days of the nuclear age.

This points to another important but largely unrecognized fact: the history of the nuclear age is not the same thing as the history of the Cold War. While

⁴⁵ “A Comparable Rationale for Course III (and Beyond)”, box 10, PPRG, JFKL.

⁴⁶ See Jussi M. Hanhimäki’s chapter and Marc Trachtenberg’s chapter in this volume.

⁴⁷ “Into the Open,” *Time Magazine*, January 2, 1961, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,895206,00.html.

⁴⁸ National Intelligence Council, “The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation: Balance of Incentives and Constraints,” September 1985, www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0000453458/0000453458_0001.gif.

they obviously overlapped and interacted, different dynamics were at play in each arena. By the mid-1960s, the goal of non-proliferation at times made the Soviets and Americans less ideological rivals than realistic partners in what often appeared to be a concert or condominium to manage the most important military question in world politics. And when states like Britain, France, China, Israel, India, South Africa, and Pakistan developed nuclear weapons, and others ranging from Brazil to Taiwan toyed with weapons programs, Cold War considerations were only one factor, and often not the most important motivation. Even though the nuclear programs that have caused the most worry in the past decade, those of Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea, began during the Cold War, the persistence of these programs after the disappearance of the Soviet Union reveals other motives were at play.

It is difficult to untangle the relationship between the two parallel drivers of postwar world politics, the Cold War and the nuclear revolution. Most historians would accept that no account of the Cold War is complete without understanding the influence of the bomb on world politics. But the history of the nuclear age reveals a narrative that is both part of yet outside the story of the US–Soviet rivalry. The Cold War is long finished, but the drama of the nuclear age continues, with untold, uncertain endings.