

24 February 2014

## The NPT: The Center Can Hold

The Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been remarkably successful in restraining the nuclear ambitions of most states, or so argues William Tobey. If it is to succeed in the future, however, the ‘best’ must uphold their convictions while the ‘worst’ must recognize that proliferation is ultimately a dead end.

By William Tobey for ISN

Twenty-five years before the first supercritical atomic chain soared above the New Mexico desert, William Butler Yeats surveyed the carnage of the Great War and offered a prophecy [recalled](#) by U.S. President Barack Obama in his 2009 Prague Speech on nuclear policy.

In *The Second Coming* Yeats wrote:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

. . .

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Are we now facing a cascade of nuclear proliferation that will destroy the 1970 Nonproliferation Treaty, or can we hold the nuclear ambitions of states and other actors in check?

The threat to the Nonproliferation Treaty is acute, but limited. Two states—North Korea and Iran—pose profound challenges to the most broadly adhered to treaty in the world (second only in membership to the United Nations Charter). North Korea violated and then abandoned the Treaty, ultimately conducting three nuclear weapons tests. Iran [violated](#) its Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the Agency [suspects](#) Tehran’s nuclear program of “possible military dimensions.” While talks with Iran are now at a hopeful stage (as they have been on several earlier occasions), a permanent agreement is far from certain; even President Obama assesses the odds of success as 50-50 at best. Thus, the Iranian proliferation threat remains real.

Some [warn](#) that if Iran attains a nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt will be compelled to match Tehran. In South Korea, at least one prominent politician, Chung Mong-joon, [argues](#) that Seoul “must have nuclear capability” to deter the North. Similar arguments are sometimes heard in Japan. Nonetheless, four empirical observations and three policy prescriptions should give us hope that we can avoid a proliferation cascade.

First, the Nonproliferation Treaty has proven to be remarkably durable. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy [worried](#) that by the 1970s, his successor might face as many as 25 states with nuclear weapons. Instead, only nine states possess nuclear weapons today, just five more than was the case during the Kennedy Administration. In the last twenty-five years, the number of states that possess nuclear weapons has not increased. North Korea was added to the list, but South Africa disarmed itself.

Second, the reasons for states *not* to pursue nuclear weapons are strong. Kennedy based his prediction on [a secret memorandum](#) written to him by his Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara. Although McNamara offered a pessimistic proliferation forecast, he acknowledged that:

“The motivations not to undertake programs are clearly strong. They include the high cost of weapons (and especially of sophisticated delivery systems), lack of a clear military need, legal restrictions, concern for international repercussions, moral pressures, lack of effective independence in the case of the satellites to undertake a program, and the hope that diffusion will be halted.”

Four of the states that McNamara cited as having “nuclear weapons capabilities” later built such systems, *but 19 others did not*, including some thought to be capable of a nuclear test within five years. If anything, norms against nuclear proliferation, and measures taken to prevent it, are stronger today than they were fifty years ago, including of course the Nonproliferation Treaty itself.

Third, extended deterrence is a powerful tool. No U.S. ally went nuclear after the McNamara memo, although many including Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Norway, Australia, and Japan possessed the technical capabilities to do so. That the Obama Administration [responded](#) to provocations from Pyongyang by sending nuclear-capable bombers to the Korean Peninsula underscores the enduring utility of this policy (and raises awkward questions about the prudence of President Obama’s vision of a world free of nuclear weapons).

Extended deterrence in Europe and Northeast Asia is a longstanding policy backed by strong military capabilities. It is constructed through a system of shared risks and burdens, and rests on a foundation of common values. Building such an edifice would be more difficult in response to Iran. The Arab world does not share core values with the United States and military risks and burdens would vary widely. Would Americans willingly risk New York to protect Riyadh? Perhaps not, but it would not be necessary. Were Iran to attain a nuclear weapons capability, the declaration of a retaliatory policy could deter Iran from using or brandishing nuclear weapons against its neighbors and U.S. allies in Europe. It would also reassure Iran’s neighbors that pursuing their own costly nuclear programs would do little to add to their security. Being clear about this now might also affect the calculus of Tehran’s decision to build nuclear weapons.

Fourth, nuclear proliferation is reversible. It is not a ratchet turning in only one direction. As noted earlier, South Africa dismantled its indigenous nuclear weapons program. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine voluntarily relinquished the nuclear weapons they inherited. Libya and a dozen other countries have also abandoned serious efforts to develop nuclear weapons. To be sure, the hard men who rule North Korea and Iran seem committed to their nuclear programs and will not willingly give them up, or cede power. The hope that North Korea’s regime would fall, along with other Communist satellite governments in the 1990s, was long ago dashed, and Western negotiators have searched in vain for elusive “Iranian moderates” for decades. It is, however, worth remembering that these regimes are tough but brittle—fashioned from pig iron, rather than titanium—and that even the hardest and most brutal of autocracies, the Soviet Union, could not last.

What then should be done to maximize chances that the Nonproliferation Treaty will endure, that the center will hold?

First, false deals that prolong dictatorial regimes while failing to solve the proliferation problem should be rejected. The classic example of this pitfall is North Korea, which pursued a stated policy of “freeze for rewards,” but simply reaped economic and political benefits while cheating on its commitments. We are likely watching (and so is Tehran) another example of this in Syria, where the deal on chemical weapons substantially strengthened the Assad regime, despite [doing little](#) so far to remove nerve agents.

In the case of Iran, the IAEA must be permitted to investigate fully the “possible military dimensions” of the Iranian nuclear program and to root them out, before any final deal is struck. Similarly, Tehran must commit to end its illicit procurement efforts. These are bare minimum conditions for a verifiable agreement; other measures will also be required. If a verifiable agreement cannot be achieved, it is better that Iran visibly suffer permanent economic and political consequences, as an example to other states that might contemplate proliferation, than to be seen as eluding sanctions while maintaining a nuclear weapons capability.

Second, do not undermine extended deterrence. The policy and the capabilities that underlie it have been a bulwark against nuclear proliferation and will serve that function in the future. U.S. decisions regarding future nuclear doctrine, maintaining scientific and technical capabilities, weapons life extension programs, and stockpile size should all take into account the need to sustain extended deterrence.

Third, improved nuclear security must remain a top priority. President Obama held the first Nuclear Security Summit in 2010, to highlight this pressing issue, and another will be held in the Hague next month. Much good work has been done, but the job is not over. Continuing seizures of fissile material—plutonium and highly enriched uranium—outside of authorized control, including cases in 2003, 2006, 2010, and 2011 are clear evidence of nuclear security breakdowns. Combined with significant security incidents in South Africa in 2007 and Oak Ridge, Tennessee in 2012, the seizures show systemic failures that must be corrected.

Despite repeated challenges, the Nonproliferation Treaty has been remarkably successful. To maintain it, and to avoid the nuclear anarchy that would attend its demise, the best must maintain their convictions and the worst must be convinced that pursuing proliferation will not advantage them over the long term. If we remember history and apply sensible policies, the center can hold.

---

William Tobey is a senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He served on the U.S. National Security Council Staff in three administrations.

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland