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Iran, American Politics and the Norm of Non-Proliferation

What did Benjamin Netanyahu's recent speech to the US Congress tell us about the politics of American foreign policy? As Campbell Craig sees it, it showed that many US politicians 1) no longer acknowledge presidential foreign-policy prerogatives, 2) do not intend to comply with nuclear non-proliferation norms, and 3) still believe in 'free security'.

By Campbell Craig for ISN

The spectacle of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress in March, with many Democratic politicians, not just Republicans, cheering a foreign leader's denunciation of their president, was surpassed only by the ensuing letter delivered by several GOP politicians to Iran seeking to undermine the negotiations over its nuclear ambitions. These events have been widely described as a new low in American politics. They have exposed the power of the right-wing 'Israel lobby' in Washington, indicated that many US politicians no longer acknowledge White House foreign-policy prerogatives, and paved the way for an interesting political debate in the Democratic party campaign for the presidential nomination next year.

What has been less discussed is how this kind of politics undermines the norm of nuclear nonproliferation. For the past fifty years or so, proponents of nonproliferation, including the US, have sought to persuade nations that they will be rewarded for playing by the rules of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT), whose aim is to prevent the spread of nuclear arsenals and reduce the possibility of catastrophic war. Yet recent policy and rhetoric indicate that the US has no intention of playing by these rules itself. This disregard for the norm of non-proliferation can be explained, in part, by the unusually permissive conditions of US power and security, which tends to insulate American politicians from having to get foreign policy right or take it too seriously. The irony, of course, is that the norm of nonproliferation is itself central to long-term US security interests.

The hazards of 'free security'

The international norm of nonproliferation requires existing nuclear powers to do two things. First, as Article IV of the treaty states, nuclear powers must permit all states, irrespective of political orientation, to have access to the technology necessary for the production of nuclear energy, which means that all non-nuclear weapon states party to the treaty are permitted to enrich uranium, as long as they have not received nuclear weapon technologies from other nations. The authors of the treaty fully understood that the nonproliferation regime could not work if some states were allowed to enrich

and others not, as this would turn nonproliferation into an arbitrary process driven by the political interests of dominant powers, and so destroy its credibility. Indeed, it became clear during negotiations of the original treaty that states would not accept a permanent disparity in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This is why they demanded the inclusion of article IV: without it, there would have been no treaty.

Second, the nonproliferation norm is predicated on the belief that the existing nuclear states must take active steps toward nuclear disarmament. Not arms reduction, not dismantling obsolete weaponry, not stashing thousands of warheads in storage, not vague talk about a world without nuclear weapons: no, existing nuclear states must move seriously toward a national policy of eliminating the bomb completely and no longer relying upon the deterrence it provides. Otherwise, non-nuclear states will conclude that they have signed a treaty that condemns them to permanent inferiority. That, in turn, may lead them to regard the NPT as hypocritical and to consider building their own nuclear weapons.

The recent political behaviour of the US reveals unambiguously that it has no interest in respecting these principles. The core demand of Article IV is obviously irrelevant to many leaders in Washington: Iran has been singled out for massive sanctions and the threat of war, even though sixteen nations have enriched uranium since the signing of the treaty, with four of them having acquired a nuclear weapon: none of them faced anything like what Iran has endured. Even more infuriating to many non-nuclear countries has been the absence of any serious moves toward disarmament by any of the existing nuclear powers. Not long after President Obama called for a world free of nuclear weapons in Prague, he signed a bill authorising \$80 billion for a long-term upgrade of the US nuclear arsenal. These kinds of decisions do not go unnoticed.

What explains American contempt for the norm of nonproliferation? It is one thing for a nation to quietly exploit an international institutional norm; what the US has done, on the other hand, is openly reject it. One explanation for this behaviour is the long-standing effect of 'free security' in the politics of US foreign policy. Because the US, protected by oceans and situated in a benign geopolitical environment, has rarely faced imminent security threats, politicians enjoy the leeway to score political points on foreign affairs issues, even at the expense of the country's diplomatic interests, because the stakes of bad policy are relatively low. A nation that must deal with real threats to its survival needs to be more careful with its foreign policies. American politicians have long understood that they need not worry much about that imperative.

During the Cold War, the US had to think twice about overtly exploiting international institutions, for fear of alienating allies or damaging plans for superpower détente. Perhaps even more important, the US was unable to define international norms entirely in accord with its own interests, because it faced rival powers and their client states whom it could not compel to support American views. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the US no longer had to worry about cooperating with another superpower or alienating anyone, and still possesses an unrivalled ability to coerce and/or bribe other states to accept American definitions of institutional legitimacy. Thus, despite the catastrophic experience of the Iraq war, US lawmakers can call for a war against Iran, in open defiance of nonproliferation norms and of the simple fact that such a war will not work. What once would have been ludicrous is now entirely feasible.

The irony of non-proliferation

Yet there is a profound irony in all of this. For there is one, and perhaps only one, thing that can threaten US preponderance and stability over the long term: the collapse of the nonproliferation norm. If more and more states come to believe that the US does not care about respecting that norm, and

that the US will selectively bully those without nuclear weapons, those states may begin to think more seriously about obtaining their own arsenals. It is not difficult to appreciate the difference between US policy toward Iran and North Korea, for example; or to see what happened to Libya after it renounced its nuclear project.

This scenario poses a threat that even the United States cannot defeat. Today, the US can still enforce a regime of sanctions and threats against a nation like Iran. It could conceivably even find some international support for a counter-proliferation war, though after Iraq this is doubtful. What is beyond doubt is that doing so would be impossible if five or ten 'Irans' began to pursue nuclear weapons capability. Sanctions regimes cannot work against multiple nations at once, and the threat of war against three or five states seeking the bomb would ring hollow. If nonproliferation fails, the US faces a future in which more and more states will acquire nuclear weapons, and thereby the ability to reject American coercion and defy its demands. That portends an exceedingly dangerous international environment if not the outright collapse of American preponderance.

Thus, the recent attempts of right-wing US politicians to scupper negotiations with Iran do more than damage the Obama administration. They provide states, small and large alike, with an incentive to acquire their own nuclear weapons. Ultimately, therefore, these actions threaten to undermine a stable world order that - through the norm of nonproliferation - has permitted US preponderance at a relatively modest cost. Of course, this could be what the American right is secretly after.

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