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# United Service

*Informing the defence and security debate since 1947*

## **Nuclear Proliferation**

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ability to manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons was the preserve of nation-states which could be relied upon to act rationally and mutual deterrence was a credible security strategy. That is no longer the case. Dispersion of nuclear materials following the break-up of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, together with recent technological advances and the spread of this new knowledge via the world-wide web, have potentially placed such capabilities in the hands of non-state actors. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported 18 attempts to traffic highly-enriched uranium or plutonium in the past decade; and estimates there could be enough nuclear materials unaccounted for world-wide to build hundreds of nuclear bombs.

There is increasing concern that terrorists and other groups on the fringes of society, which cannot be relied upon to act rationally, will develop the capability to deploy nuclear radiation, microbial pathogens and/or poison gases on a large scale. Some experts assess that humanity will be lucky to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century – Lord May, until recently Britain's chief scientific advisor, puts survival probability at little better than 50 per cent.

Faced with these odds, world leaders are now reacting. In April, the United States and Russia committed to verifiably reduce their respective nuclear warhead stockpiles by one-third to 1550 each; Chile transferred its store of highly-enriched uranium to the United States to keep it out of the reach of terrorists; and President Obama, declaring nuclear terrorism a greater global threat than the Cold War years of nuclear brinkmanship, convened a summit of world leaders at which 47 nations agreed to secure "loose nukes" (unsecured nuclear materials which could be used in a terrorist attack) under nation-state control within four years. Whether such aspirations can be realised, however, is quite another matter.

These concerns notwithstanding, the recent international security focus primarily has been on nuclear proliferation among nation-states, with the emergence of North Korea and Iran as potential nuclear powers. North Korea and Iran are seeking to neutralise the United States nuclear deterrent and to acquire valuable strategic negotiating positions, while Iran also is seeking to neutralise the Israeli nuclear deterrent.

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which currently is being re-negotiated, has not stopped the spread of nuclear weapons to states which have perceived the strategic need for them and any re-negotiated version of it is unlikely to be any more effective. For example, once India acquired a nuclear weapons capability to balance that of China, it was inevitable that Pakistan would seek to balance India's capability and did so with Chinese assistance. Similarly, once Israel acquired a nuclear capability, it was inevitable that the Arab and Islamic world opposed to Israel would seek to follow suit and has now done so with the aid of Pakistan after several failed attempts *e.g.* Libya, Iraq and Syria.

Can North Korea and Iran be prevented from bringing their nascent nuclear weapons to full operational capability if they are so minded? Probably not, and certainly not by military means – both powers have multiple dispersed facilities buried deep in geological formations which are not amenable to strategic strike; and land invasion of either country to eliminate the weapons currently is beyond the will/capability of any power or group of powers. Trade and similar sanctions have not proved effective in the past and are unlikely to be effective in the future, especially against North Korea. In short, North Korea and Iran have presented the world with a new *fait accompli*, just as India, Pakistan and Israel did before them, and the world's powers in the decade ahead will have to learn to live with and adjust to this new strategic and political reality.

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