

REVIEW ESSAYS

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF NONPROLIFERATION

Carnes Lord

Sokolski, Henry D. *Best of Intentions: America's Campaign against Strategic Weapons Proliferation*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001. 184pp. \$59.95

After the presidential inauguration of George W. Bush, global discussion of strategic issues focused largely on the meaning and implication of a renewed commitment by the United States to defense against ballistic missiles. This book reminds us that missile defense is part of a larger complex of strategic issues having to do with the long-standing American effort to prevent the worldwide spread of weapons of mass destruction. At first sight, the embrace of missile defense as a major new defense priority might seem to suggest that the current administration has written off past American nonproliferation policy or has simply accepted the idea that the only effective approach when dealing with proliferators is the military one rather than diplomacy, arms control, economic inducements or any of the other tools the United States has relied on in the past.

However this may be, it is far from the point of view reflected in this work. Henry

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Sokolski makes a sophisticated case that, though U.S. proliferation policy is not hopelessly broken, it needs significant repair.

Best of Intentions is a deeply informed, well documented, analytical study of the history of American nonproliferation policy from its beginnings immediately after World War II. By reducing a potentially unwieldy subject to little more than a hundred pages of text and notes, Sokolski has performed an important service; the book is the only one of its kind. What

makes this account particularly valuable is Sokolski's focus on the strategic assumptions underpinning American policy at various stages of its development, and on how these contributed centrally to the success or failure of the overall nonproliferation effort.

Sokolski distinguishes six "initiatives" that have tended to dominate what he argues were relatively distinct phases in the development of nonproliferation policy. The first was the Baruch Plan of 1946, which sought to institute strict international ownership and control of all nuclear materials. This approach reflected the beliefs that it would be impossible to distinguish between benign and military applications of nuclear technology, and that the existence of any significant nuclear stockpiles would inevitably lead to arms racing and preemptive nuclear war. The Baruch Plan, which soon foundered on Soviet objections, failed to foresee the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons and therefore was based on an extreme view of the dangers of the atomic age. Sokolski argues, however, that in some ways this view was more sensible than what followed.

The centerpiece of the second phase was Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" program, which led to the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as the facilitator of peacetime nuclear energy development in non-nuclear weapons states. The ultimate strategic purpose of this program (the brainchild of Eisenhower himself) was to limit and eventually draw down stockpiles of fissile material in the Soviet Union through transfer to the IAEA, thereby depriving the Soviets of a weapons inventory capable of launching a crippling attack against America's industrial base. At the same time, unfortunately, "Atoms for Peace" took an excessively casual attitude toward the spread of nuclear materials and technologies to additional countries, establishing a regime of safeguards so permissive that it may actually have encouraged proliferation. The underlying assumption of Eisenhower's plan was that very small nuclear arsenals would have little strategic value, and so some leakage in the control mechanism was tolerable.

The next major development was the protracted negotiation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which reflected renewed global concern over "horizontal" proliferation. Sokolski shows that this period actually represented two distinct phases: an early one dominated by the original (1958) Irish proposal for a multilateral treaty that would simply prohibit further spread of nuclear weapons, and a later one (culminating in the signing of the treaty in 1972) dominated by the very different attitude that nonpossessing states would be willing to forgo their inherent "right" to acquire nuclear weapons in exchange for full access to the benefits of civil nuclear technology and for serious progress toward reductions in the superpowers' nuclear arsenals. These contrasting phases reflected contrasting strategic premises. The first, that the greatest danger to

international security stems from accidental or “catalytic” war initiated by new nuclear states, implies that stopping proliferation is equally in the interest of all states. The second, holding that small nuclear arsenals are a legitimate and benign exercise in “finite deterrence,” contends that the real danger comes from the possibility of central strategic war between the superpowers.

The fifth phase began in 1975, with a meeting of advanced industrial nations (including the Soviet Union) to develop informal controls on exports to countries of particular concern. Later formalized as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), this cartel-like organization fundamentally repudiated the NPT regime’s first premise, the principle of nondiscrimination, which in effect gave the benefit of the doubt to potential proliferators. Meeting in secret, the NSG strove to build consensus on strategies for dealing with countries of particular concern. The NSG’s record proved a mixed one. Notwithstanding some successes in slowing proliferation in Taiwan, South Korea, and Pakistan in the late 1970s, it signally failed to stop the acquisition of dual-use nuclear technologies by Saddam Hussein in the 1980s (belated efforts were made to close these loopholes after the Gulf War). However, the organization did provide the model for later “supplier groups”—for missiles (the Missile Technology Control Regime) and chemical and biological weapons (the Australia Group). Significant successes were registered by these groups, particularly when their efforts were backed with the threat of legislatively mandated sanctions by the United States in the early 1990s.

With the end of the Cold War, however, it became increasingly difficult to sustain any export control regime against the pressure of commercial interests in the United States, as well as the multiplication of suppliers elsewhere. In a vain attempt to moderate their adverse proliferation behavior, Russia and China were brought into the Missile Technology Control Regime and were provided various technological inducements, thus assimilating this arrangement increasingly to what Sokolski calls the “concessionary, universalistic” nonproliferation treaty. By 1998, it was obvious that these approaches were not working adequately. In that year India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons, while Iran and North Korea tested new long-range missiles. Moreover, not only did China continue to provide help to such countries, but it pulled off an extraordinary theft of U.S. nuclear and missile secrets that directly contributed to the quantum improvement in Chinese nuclear capabilities taking place today. This was a case, one might add, of “vertical” proliferation as destabilizing as any other proliferation failure of recent years, if not more so.

These developments made the United States increasingly impatient with traditional proliferation approaches and more open to what the Clinton administration began vaguely to describe as “counter-proliferation.” This, the current phase in American proliferation policy, seems to call for reliance on military

force—especially in the form of preemptive air or special-operations assault—to cope with what now appears to be the inevitable spread of weapons of mass destruction to rogue states. Iraq has been the demonstration case of such an approach, first at the hands of the Israelis in their 1981 raid against the Osirak reactor, then at the hands of the allies in the Gulf War and after. But the practical as well as the legal difficulties inherent in “counter-proliferation” actions have so far prevented that strategy from gaining wide acceptance.

Where do we stand today? What should the United States do differently to curb proliferation in the future? What should be the place of nonproliferation strategies in U.S. foreign policy and in national security strategy overall? This volume offers no simple answer to such questions. Sokolski cautions against overblown expectations, while calling attention to the undeniable successes nonproliferation policies have had. Thanks to concerted international—particularly American—diplomatic efforts, active nuclear weapons stockpiles or programs and associated missile capabilities have been liquidated in Argentina, Brazil, Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. It is less clear, however, that such proliferation victories are possible with today’s rogue states. Nevertheless, these states remain vulnerable (as the case of South Africa nicely illustrates) to internal political developments in a more liberal direction—probably the single most potent nonproliferation tool available, Sokolski argues, yet one that has been largely neglected.

More generally, Sokolski’s argument is that nonproliferation needs to be approached within a more self-consciously “strategic” framework than in the past. This means, in the first place, paying greater attention to the character and strategic interests of proliferator states rather than relying on formal and universal arms control schemes. In the second place, it means paying more attention to the larger strategic effects of the variety of nonproliferation regimes of which we have experience. In general, Sokolski is partial to elements of the Baruch Plan, to the Irish approach to the NPT, and to the original Nuclear Suppliers Group; in contrast, he makes clear how much damage has been done to sound thinking about proliferation by Atoms for Peace and the final NPT regime. It is hard to quarrel with these judgments, or for that matter with his bedrock conviction that nuclear proliferation remains a bad thing, that more nuclear actors greatly increase the danger of accidental or catalytic nuclear war.

For all its comprehensiveness, Sokolski’s book leaves a number of issues unexplored. It has little to say about the NPT regime as it exists today, or the viability of the IAEA as a proliferation policeman—a particularly important issue in the wake of that organization’s performance in Iraq before and after the Gulf War. In fact, the book is mostly silent about the entire problem of monitoring formal or informal proliferation curbs and of responding to evidence of deliberate

violations, which has vexed the international community in this and other areas of arms control since the days of the Baruch Plan. Nor is there any discussion of the question of U.S. policy toward out-of-the-closet proliferators like India and Pakistan—another issue of current relevance, given the recent warming of U.S. diplomatic and military relations with both nations.

Further, Sokolski might have been clearer on the question of the evolving definition of proliferation, specifically on the implications of the shifting focus of nonproliferation efforts in the 1990s from nuclear materials to missiles and chemical and biological weapons. This seems a particularly significant omission given his emphasis on the need to understand the strategic premises that motivate the actors in every nonproliferation regime. Sokolski acknowledges at one point that new technologies and weapon systems considered elements of the emerging “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) will be a focus of nonproliferation efforts in the future, but he fails to examine the implications of such a development.

Let us assume that these new technologies and their associated weapon systems become a nonproliferation focus, as indeed seems likely. Under those circumstances, it might be argued, a new general strategy against proliferation should be devised that gracefully cedes the terrain of nuclear, chemical, and biological weaponry (prospectively devalued in any case by the development of theater and national missile defenses) while drawing a bright line that would protect key enabling technologies of the RMA—for example, space-based sensors and precision-strike capabilities for cruise missiles. Would such a shift define nonproliferation out of existence? Not necessarily. It might remake it as a new strategic framework for U.S. technology export control policy and counterintelligence generally—something that seems very much needed in the wake of our recent experiences with China.