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COMMENTARY

Blame America First

 By **STEPHEN RADEMAKER**
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Two groups with diametrically opposed agendas have for years argued that the likes of Iran and North Korea will not be deterred in their quest for nuclear weapons so long as the U.S. and the other nuclear powers are ignoring their obligation under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to give up their nuclear arsenals. Apologists for the proliferators, who care not at all about nuclear disarmament, and arms control activists, to whom there is no higher priority than nuclear disarmament, have long agreed about this and little else.


Jimmy Carter spoke for the latter group when he wrote, in an op-ed in the Washington Post a while back, "The United States is the major culprit in this erosion of the NPT." The key to ending nuclear proliferation, according to Mr. Carter and the many others who share this point of view, is for the U.S. to demonstrate leadership by moving decisively to eliminate its nuclear weapons. This perspective is likely to be heard more frequently as international efforts to constrain the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea appear to falter.



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There are, however, two basic flaws in the suggestion that nuclear proliferation is rooted in U.S. nuclear policy. First, the reasons why Iran, North Korea and other would-be proliferators seek nuclear weapons have nothing to do with Washington's nuclear policy. Second, the claim that the U.S. is disregarding its legal obligations under the NPT does not withstand scrutiny.

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To recognize that the motivations of today's nuclear proliferators have nothing to do with U.S. nuclear policy, it is necessary only to consider one question: Would Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or North Korea's Kim Jong Il be any less interested in having nuclear weapons if the U.S. gave up its nuclear weapons? In both cases, the answer is clearly no.

President Ahmadinejad, by his own statements, is bent on dominating the Middle East and destroying the state of Israel. Nuclear weapons afford a shortcut to the realization of these objectives and therefore the Iranian regime wants them. Whether or not the U.S. has nuclear weapons is irrelevant to this calculus. Mr. Ahmadinejad may occasionally find it a convenient talking point to draw comparisons with the nuclear programs of other countries, but there is little doubt his policy would be the same even in the absence of that talking point.

In the case of North Korea, the pursuit of nuclear weapons appears to stem from Kim Jong Il's hunger for prestige and power. All indications are that Kim would be even more interested in having nuclear weapons if he thought he could be the only leader on Earth to possess them.

Those who argue that the U.S. has disregarded its nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT are quick to make categorical assertions about the treaty's requirements, but almost never quote the pertinent language of the NPT, for the simple reason that it provides no support for their claims. The key provision, Article VI of the treaty, consists of only one sentence: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

It is impossible to discern from this language a binding legal obligation on the U.S. and the other four nuclear-weapon states to give up nuclear weapons. The operative legal requirement is to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating . . . to nuclear disarmament. . . ."

The U.S. has not only negotiated on such matters for more than three decades, but it has signed and implemented a series of arms control agreements beginning in 1972 that have ended the nuclear arms race and substantially reduced the U.S. nuclear inventory. When the latest arms control agreement with Russia expires in 2012, the U.S. will have reduced by about 80% the number of strategic nuclear warheads deployed at the height of the Cold War.

Significantly, the obligations of Article VI apply not just to the five countries allowed by the treaty to have nuclear weapons, but to all parties to the NPT. Article VI clearly links the obligation to negotiate on nuclear disarmament with an obligation on the part of all NPT parties to negotiate "a Treaty on general and complete disarmament."

The treaty also does not assume that nuclear disarmament must be a prerequisite to general and complete disarmament. To the contrary, one of the treaty's introductory paragraphs spells out the expectation of the parties that actual "elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons" would take place not prior to, but "pursuant to a Treaty on general and complete disarmament."

Those who in essence agree with the views of a Noam Chomsky that "The United States has led the way in refusal to abide by the Article VI obligations," notwithstanding more than 30 years of nuclear arms control, need to explain why they are not similarly exercised by the failure of all other NPT states to satisfy their

Article VI obligations. In particular, they need to explain why the U.S. must do more to comply with Article VI's nuclear disarmament provisions, in the absence of even token steps by anyone else to comply with that Article's general and complete disarmament requirements.

Because the language of Article VI does not actually say what proponents of nuclear disarmament want it to say, they have worked for decades to reinterpret it. They have, for example, promoted declarations by international conferences reformulating the requirements of Article VI, and then argued that these reformulations are legally binding on the U.S., without approval by the U.S. Senate. These efforts have succeeded to a remarkable degree, at least as measured by popular conceptions of the NPT's nuclear-disarmament requirements.

And so the critics are not impressed that by 2012 the U.S. will have reduced its deployed strategic nuclear warheads by 80%. They will not be satisfied if the U.S. reduces by 99%. So long as there is one nuclear weapon remaining in the U.S. inventory, they will point to this as a root cause of nuclear proliferation.

Few serious students of nuclear strategy believe that the stockpiles of the nuclear weapon states can be reduced to zero in the foreseeable future. Fortunately our reliance on nuclear weapons has been declining, and the U.S. should continue to eliminate unnecessary nuclear weapons based on considered judgments about our national security requirements. But we should not base such decisions about our nuclear force structure on wishful thinking that we can earn the goodwill of nuclear proliferators and other critics whose agendas are advanced by blaming America for nuclear proliferation.

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