



International Impacts  
of US Nuclear Weapons  
Policy Workshop

US Nuclear Policy  
Review Project

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This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteur, J. Peter Scoblic. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

## International Implications for and Levers on US Nuclear Weapons Policy

### Key Points

- Analysts disagree as to whether the US nuclear posture affects Washington's ability to pursue its nonproliferation goals. Broadly speaking, one sector links nonproliferation to US progress toward fulfilling its Article VI commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—a link enshrined in the treaty itself. Another group of analysts believes that progress toward nuclear disarmament will have no effect on the most threatening states and could even encourage proliferation among US allies.
- Those who emphasize US commitments under Article VI of the NPT focus very little on the role of the US nuclear umbrella in preventing nuclear proliferation, neglecting the impact of disarmament on US allies such as Japan and South Korea. Conversely, those who argue that proliferation and disarmament are not connected are far less likely to cite the effects of US policy on countries concerned with the legitimacy of the NPT such as South Africa, India, and the European states.
- The phrase *nuclear umbrella* is misleading and needs clarification. Deliberate ambiguity on the part of the United States increases the difficulty of determining what role our nuclear arms play in security guarantees.
- US confidence-building measures that would signal progress on disarmament include multilateral actions, such as ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and negotiating a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT); bilateral actions with Russia, such as adding verification mechanisms to the Moscow Treaty and negotiating a follow-on to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START); and unilateral actions, such as changing US declaratory policy or reducing the number of US warhead levels.
- The ratification of the CTBT by the United States would not ensure the treaty's entry into force, but it would mean that the United States would no longer be seen as the chief culprit in *delaying* its entry into force—it would “no longer be the one catching spears on the issue”—and the spotlight would shift to other intransigent countries. This is a substantial benefit.
- As the United States contemplates further nuclear reductions, China will become an increasingly serious issue. US policymakers must determine what warhead ratio vis-à-vis China will be acceptable to the American public and consider whether nuclear parity might actually be destabilizing.
- Current US nuclear policy is troubling because it suggests targeting nonnuclear weapon states (NNWSs) and could therefore undermine US negative security assurances.

- To what extent can a country exist outside the US alliance system but inside the NPT without being threatened by the United States? Is the United States willing to offer real security assurances in return for nonproliferation?
- The nonproliferation battle line will be drawn over national control of uranium enrichment and reprocessing. All countries need to move toward international control if the world is going to prevent proliferation.

## Introduction

American policymakers and analysts disagree as to whether the US nuclear posture affects Washington's ability to pursue its nonproliferation goals. Broadly speaking, one sector of the foreign policy community links nonproliferation to US progress toward fulfilling its Article VI commitments under the NPT—a link enshrined in the treaty itself. Another group of analysts believes that progress toward nuclear disarmament will have no effect on the most threatening states and could even encourage proliferation among US allies. Compounding this disagreement is the lack of significant evidence supporting either view. On July 31, 2008, the Stanley Foundation convened a group of experts to examine the international implications of US nuclear weapons policy and to assess the amount of influence the United States has over the proliferation decisions of other nations.

## Differing Assertions

The argument that progress on Article VI is imperative if the United States is to halt the spread of nuclear weapons has been made most prominently in recent years by George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published in January 2007, they asserted that a “solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally” would be a “vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands.” In a follow-on piece published one year later, they wrote, “Without the vision of moving toward zero, we will not find the essential cooperation required to stop our downward spiral.”

Few experts believe that reducing the number of nuclear weapons deployed by the United States could directly convince North Korea or Iran to give up their nuclear ambitions, but many think that steps toward fulfilling Article VI commitments would shore up the nonproliferation regime by increasing its international legitimacy and encouraging other countries to pressure Iran and North Korea to dismantle their nuclear programs. Others

believe that progress on Article VI could affect the decision of potential proliferators—that they might behave differently depending on whether they thought the world would have a lesser or greater number of nuclear powers in the future. Similarly, others fear that if it appears the NPT is headed toward a breakdown, once-nuclear states like South Africa and nuclear-capable states like Egypt might decide to lay the groundwork for future nuclearization.

However, a different sector of the policy community sees no connection between nonproliferation and US progress on its Article VI commitments. They argue that it is naïve to think that Pyongyang or Tehran is influenced by nonproliferation norms—even though no one is making that argument—and they emphasize that countries like Israel, India, and Pakistan have nuclear weapons simply because they think it is in their best interest. They also point out that states such as North Korea and Iran may be developing their nuclear arms in response to overwhelming American conventional power, meaning that US nuclear posture has little or no bearing upon their proliferation decisions. Moreover, members of this group believe that disarmament could backfire: encouraging proliferation by degrading the US nuclear umbrella and unintentionally prompting states that depend on it for their security—such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea—to consider developing their own nuclear weapons.

Strikingly, each group emphasizes a different set of countries and has largely avoided any discussion of the implications of US nuclear posture elsewhere. Those who emphasized US commitments under Article VI of the NPT paid scant attention to the role of the US nuclear umbrella in preventing nuclear proliferation, neglecting the impact of disarmament on US allies such as Japan and South Korea. In contrast, the other group was far less likely to cite the effects of US policy on countries concerned with the legitimacy of the NPT such as South Africa, India, and the European states.

One way to deal with this asymmetry is to disaggregate the impact of US nuclear policy on several different tiers of countries. Although every country has its own interests, there is enough commonality to divide them into four broad categories:

1. *Current nuclear powers.* Key issues to consider include the role of missile defense on vertical proliferation and the effect that US nuclear doctrine could have on the nuclear doctrine of other states.

2. *Determined proliferators such as North Korea and Iran.* Although the Bush administration has argued that US nuclear posture might dissuade such states from taking certain steps, most experts believe that there is little or no direct link between US nuclear posture alone (as distinct from public US statements about “regime change” and conventional threats) and the posture of determined proliferators.
3. *Nations under the US nuclear umbrella.* A key consideration for these countries is whether they will go nuclear if they lose confidence in US security guarantees.
4. *Other NNWSs.* There is little reliable information on how US nuclear weapons policy affects these states’ nonproliferation decisions. There is some anecdotal evidence that states such as South Africa and Malaysia have refused to pursue nonproliferation measures—for example, minimizing civilian use of highly enriched uranium or tightening export controls under UN Security Council Resolution 1540—until the United States makes progress on disarmament. Few studies, however, have shed much light on the decision-making processes of these governments.

In addition, at least two crosscutting groups merit consideration:

1. *States that have previously suspended their nuclear programs, but can reverse that decision.*
2. *Nuclear supplier states.*

For all of these countries, it is also important to consider how US nuclear arms policy will affect their willingness to back US nonproliferation initiatives—including the application of diplomatic pressure on determined proliferators such as North Korea and Iran. Any change in US nuclear posture should take into account possible effects on all of these audiences. Serious reductions in the US arsenal must—at a minimum—be accompanied by substantial efforts to keep countries under the US umbrella informed about US reasoning and reassured that US security guarantees are not being called into question.

### **Moving Ahead, Carefully**

Most conference participants seemed to believe that progress toward Article VI does matter, and that US action could help its nonproliferation efforts. One participant noted that the United States could sig-

nal progress on its Article VI commitments via (1) multilateral actions, such as ratifying the CTBT and negotiating an FMCT; (2) bilateral actions with Russia, such as adding verification mechanisms to the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) and negotiating a follow-on to START; (3) unilateral actions, such as changing US declaratory policy or cutting US warhead levels.

One conference participant suggested that the most important thing the United States can do is to change its rhetoric about nuclear weapons, though the impact of that language would vary depending on the category of state being talked about. Substantive progress would have to follow that rhetorical shift, including progress on the CTBT, FMCT, and a follow-on to START, which the participant described as “imperative.” (“The US-Russian relationship *has* to be seen as making progress.”) A rhetorical change would give the United States a grace period during which countries would not demand progress on the CTBT until at least 2010. Beyond rhetoric, the participant said that the importance of each action depends largely on the constituency it is intended to affect.

Another participant objected to the emphasis on the importance of rhetoric, believing that emphasis suggested that the NPT regime was in danger of collapse. Against such fears, this participant contended that the nuclear taboo has been deeply entrenched—and the nonproliferation regime is far more legitimate than recent talk might suggest. It is not only words that hold the regime together, nor is the regime simply—or even primarily—held together by the “grand bargain” between nuclear and nonnuclear states. States adhere to the NPT in large part because they gain security benefits by promising not to develop nuclear weapons because their neighbors also forgo the development of nuclear weapons as well. They believe that a proliferation spiral is clearly contrary to their national interest.

Other participants objected to this optimistic assessment of the NPT, suggesting that the Bush administration has seriously undermined the agreement with its actions, notably the decision to send Assistant Secretary of State John Rood instead of an appropriately senior official to the 2005 NPT Review Conference. By opposing other nonproliferation measures, such as a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia (which the United States had supported for decades) and exploring new nuclear weapons, the Bush administration greatly weakened the NPT. The preponderance of participants

agreed that the NPT “is as weak now as it’s ever been” and that US rhetoric does set the tone for nonproliferation efforts.

Concerning substantive steps, participants asked how much good will the United States could really generate by ratifying the CTBT. Would ratification motivate other countries to aid US nonproliferation efforts, or is US ratification “already priced into the market”? By and large, conference participants agreed that US ratification would be interpreted as the United States finally making good on a commitment from 1996, rather than as a new step—most states would view the United States asking for a quid pro quo as an attempt to get paid twice for the same good. However, ratification would mean that the United States is no longer seen as the chief culprit in delaying the CTBT’s entry into force—it would “no longer be the one catching spears on the issue,” as one participant put it—and the spotlight would shift to other intransigent countries. This is a substantial benefit.

To an extent, other countries may also consider the FMCT “priced into the market”—in the sense that agreeing to pursue it will not produce any new quid pro quo—because the United States agreed to do so during the 1995 NPT extension conference. That said, successful negotiation of an FMCT would inherently provide some nonproliferation benefits to the United States. Participants agreed that the FMCT should be pursued as we attempt to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons and proceed toward fulfilling our Article VI obligations.

Conference participants asked whether all nuclear weapon states (NWSs)—or just the United States—also have to make progress on disarmament to benefit nonproliferation efforts. Members of the conference concluded that, fairly or not, the United States and Russia are widely seen to bear the greatest burden for progress on Article VI commitments because of the size of their arsenals. However, US policymakers must ask what warhead ratio vis-à-vis China will be acceptable to the American public and consider whether nuclear parity might actually be destabilizing. If we are to reduce our own nuclear force to levels below 1,000 warheads, China and others will have to become a “totally integral part of that process.”

Insofar as progress on disarmament could actually spur proliferation, conference participants discussed the importance of US nuclear policy to our allies. One said that allies were likely more con-

cerned with the depth of the US commitment to protect them rather than with the exact number of warheads in the US arsenal. Several participants believed that the phrase *nuclear umbrella* is misleading because it emphasizes defense rather than deterrence and obscures the nature of our security commitments. The term *umbrella* could mean any type of commitment: (1) commitment to a broad, purely conventional response to aggression; (2) commitment to a nuclear response to aggression; (3) commitment to a conventional response to the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); or (4) commitment to a nuclear response to aggression using WMD, or perhaps only in response to a nuclear attack. Deliberate ambiguity by the United States increases the difficulty of determining what role our nuclear arms play in security guarantees.

One participant asked whether the notion of “dissuasion,” as advanced in the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), obviated our Article VI commitments because it suggests the need to maintain a robust nuclear force indefinitely to dissuade others from developing atomic weapons. Indeed, the NSS says that the United States should maintain military capabilities so impressive that others will be dissuaded from trying to counter them. To the extent that this refers to nuclear weapons, it would undercut Article VI. Furthermore, the 2001 NPR says that other countries will be dissuaded from pursuing specific military programs because the United States has a demonstrated capability to destroy those programs, suggesting further reliance on nuclear weapons.

The NPR is also troubling because it suggests targeting NNWSs and could therefore undermine US negative security assurances. Just as we assess whether the credibility of our positive security assurances—e.g., the nuclear umbrella—affects proliferation behavior, participants agreed that we should ask whether our negative security assurances are effective. Conversely, it would be useful to find out whether countries change their proliferation behavior if they believe the United States is targeting them with nuclear weapons. (Operationally, the Department of Defense makes targeting decisions, while the promulgation of negative security assurances is a political activity. They are not always synchronized, and reconciliation would require intervention by the political leadership.) Similarly, we do not know how other countries have responded to the Bush administration’s addition of dissuasion to the list of roles for US nuclear weapons.

Conference participants disagreed about the extent to which the Bush administration has changed US nuclear policy. Some suggested that our negative security assurances remain the same as they were under the Clinton administration despite several ostensible changes to US nuclear posture. Others said that even if this were true, there were still inconsistencies between US nuclear posture and its negative security assurances and commitment to Article VI.

Changes in the US nuclear posture will have to involve discussion of what part nuclear weapons play in securing peace among great powers. However, we should also be careful about saying that nuclear weapons have “guaranteed” peace over the past half century—lest this overstate the case and understate the risk of *not* making progress on Article VI. It might prevent doable and desirable reductions in our nuclear arsenal.

### How Do NNWSs Make Decisions?

One conference participant sought to discover whether NNWSs are truly motivated by a desire to see Article VI fulfilled, or whether they make proliferation decisions based on self-interest and simply use arguments about “fairness” as rhetorical cover. The participant was struck by the fact that most experts “seem to think we soon will, or have hit a brick wall in attempts to get countries to make progress on nonproliferation” and that “[t]he main explanation seems to be that countries [are not cooperating] because the nuclear weapon states have not made progress on disarmament.” Yet surprisingly little attention has been devoted to figuring out the truth of this assertion.

To illuminate the motives of such states, the participant examined decisions made during the 1995 NPT Review Conference, which ended in the indefinite extension of the treaty, through two frameworks:

1. *A legitimacy framework.* This approach posits that NNWSs are motivated by normative considerations. Because NWSs are not fulfilling their part of the NPT bargain under Article VI, the NPT lacks legitimacy. States are now unwilling to make progress on their NPT obligations and related commitments—i.e., “NPT-Plus obligations”—because they believe that the treaty is illegitimate.
2. *A material-interests framework.* This assumes that states consider their nonproliferation obligations using cost-benefit analysis of material and security gains. Even if the nonproliferation regime is fair, states might not commit to it if they

believe its benefits to be too distant, abstract, or diffuse in comparison to the costs. They may simply complain about lack of progress on Article VI as a “rhetorical shield” for decisions that they base on other considerations.

If the legitimacy framework is accurate, then the road to preventing proliferation is simple: the NWSs need to disarm. If, however, the material-interests framework is more salient, then the United States might more effectively pursue its nonproliferation goals through alternate means. Both frameworks offer a plausible account of the 1995 NPT Review Conference, but the material-interests approach seems more persuasive.

At the beginning of the conference, the pro-Western group led by the Clinton administration supported indefinite extension of the NPT but was pessimistic about the prospects for success. American negotiators adopted a strategy of focusing on specific countries’ immediate interests, isolating and frightening critics of indefinite extension. For example, US negotiators told South Africa that they would undermine their attempt to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group and reminded Mexico that it owed the United States for rescuing the country’s economy during the 1994 peso crisis. (The United States also saw to it that Mexico’s ambassador was expelled from the delegation.) US negotiators also preyed on smaller countries’ fears of the countries opposed to extension of the NPT—for example, playing small North African countries against the regional leader, Egypt.

By the penultimate week of the conference, all but 11 countries had moved to support permanent extension of the NPT. Those 11 wanted stringent disarmament measures and periodic review of the treaty. This final group was brought on board by a pair of proposals that more explicitly committed the NWSs to disarmament. That could suggest that their earlier opposition had been motivated by concerns about the fairness of the NPT, or they may simply have held out to secure concessions from the West. As their bargaining position continued to erode, they may have been convinced that accepting a face-saving measure was preferable to being on the wrong side of an emerging consensus.

According to this participant, there is little evidence that indicates NPT countries are motivated by their support for disarmament. The evidence that we do have is either anecdotal or from government sources—and we have to question its validity. There is not a single empirical study that pries open the

black box of government decision making and demonstrates a connection between progress on Article VI and support for NPT-Plus measures. In fact, many states signed on to the Additional Protocol *after* the 2001 NPR cast doubt on the US commitment to its Article VI obligations. Three times as many states signed up to the Additional Protocol after the Bush administration's snub at the 2005 NPT Review Conference as before.

The preeminence of interests over norms may be a good thing, however. If the material-interests framework says more about states' proliferation decisions than progress on Article VI, then we can use a vast array of sticks and carrots—including economic and security incentives—to convince states to sign on to the NPT. Political roadblocks to Article VI implementation need not prevent progress.

### Response

Conference participants cautioned against dismissing concerns about legitimacy as mere fig leaves for interests. In negotiation, face-saving devices can actually be quite important—especially taking into account the fact that ambassadors speak to multiple constituencies. They are not simply talking to the global public; they are talking to audiences in their home countries, especially their own bureaucracies.

Nevertheless, conference participants agreed that a more material-interests-oriented approach to nonproliferation could be useful, particularly vis-à-vis poorer countries. Nonproliferation advocates seldom think of nuclear proliferation as an issue of economic development, while the World Bank rarely thinks of development as a proliferation issue. At the same time, an integrated approach that provides development benefits to countries and explains why nonproliferation obligations are not unreasonable—for instance, connecting the control of borders and nonproliferation security on the one hand, with economic development on the other—might prove highly effective. Countries should not have to choose between making good on their NPT-Plus commitments and economic development.

One participant suggested that it would be useful to understand the scale of the economic trade-offs that states face when they decide whether or not to accept NPT-Plus obligations. If there is truly a material cost-benefit analysis, then it would make a difference whether NPT-Plus obligations add 5 or 10 percent to the cost of nuclear energy, or whether they double or triple the costs—on top of other bureaucratic costs like the imposition of export controls.

Another participant pointed out that the decision to comply with nonproliferation obligations is not always a function of cost. Many states simply do not have the institutional capacity to enforce nonproliferation rules. A number of conference participants recalled trips to countries that clearly had few such capabilities—with high-level customs officers headquartered in jungle shacks and the like. For these countries, living up to NPT obligations is as much a matter of state building as it is as of economic development.

This discussion highlighted the fact that countries with developed nuclear power programs are not the only ones that are reluctant to adopt nonproliferation measures. Low-income industrialized countries and others slightly higher on the development ladder can pose the worst risks. For example, it can be hard to convince uranium-exporting countries—or countries that rely on the export of machine parts, such as Malaysia—to restrict the transfer of dual-use items. There is a cognitive clash that needs to be overcome by showing that export controls on these items can help, rather than hurt, a state's broader economic interests.

Conference participants found the division between questions of interest and legitimacy somewhat artificial. "Asking whether a decision is made based on legitimacy or interests is like asking whether area is determined by length or width," said one. Most experts "would be shocked" if, in any given case, a proliferation decision was made based solely on one of these reasons without reference to the other. The United States can tailor its approaches to specific countries, but—in the estimation of some participants—this must be done with an eye toward bringing coherence back into its nonproliferation strategy.

Conference participants worried that the international community has not demonstrated that withdrawal from the NPT risks enormous consequences. Hypothetically, if a country were to withdraw from the regime and keep its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is unlikely that there would be negative consequences. In such an environment, something like the US-India nuclear deal can severely undermine the legitimacy of the NPT. According to several participants, the United States has insufficiently appreciated the relation of legitimacy to security. While interests may be key to many countries' nonproliferation decisions, making bilateral deals contrary to the spirit of the NPT empowers

anti-nonproliferation constituencies in countries, such as Brazil, that will press for a nuclear power program and hedge.

For evidence that normative concerns do matter, a participant stated, one need only recall France's and China's experiences with nuclear testing during the 1990s. "There was a very strong visitation on those governments from the rest of the world, indicating that it was not okay at all [to test]." France did not enjoy the experience. The norm is a great deal stronger than people realize.

One conference participant suggested that the narrow issue of US nuclear disarmament is actually serving as a proxy for a much larger question about the degree to which it is legitimate for the United States to threaten countries that are not falling in line. To what extent can a country exist outside the US alliance system but inside the NPT without being threatened by the United States? Is the United States willing to offer real security assurances in return for nonproliferation? This person said that these are clearly the key questions with regard to "determined proliferators" such as Iran and North Korea.

Another participant argued that, in the long run, the real nonproliferation battle line will be over national control of uranium enrichment and reprocessing. All countries need to move toward international control if we are going to prevent proliferation. This is essentially what is at stake in North Korea and Iran, and—properly understood—everyone's long-term interest runs in this direction. The fate of nonproliferation turns on this battle.

### Getting More Information

Even after a great deal of discussion, conference participants noted that "we haven't begun to scratch the surface of what motivates states" to support nonproliferation efforts. Many were stunned and disconcerted by the lack of academic research on this topic. That paucity of analysis means that policy experts—both those who think that compliance with Article VI is essential to US nonproliferation efforts and those who do not—are regularly making claims that are unsupported by empirical evidence.

Conference participants suggested several research methodologies to investigate how states make nonproliferation-related decisions. One suggested conducting a structured set of interviews with US policymakers who have worked on recent nonprolifera-

tion diplomacy—i.e., officials party to talks on the Proliferation Security Initiative, the six-party process with North Korea, and so forth—in order to gauge the degree to which these officials' jobs have been complicated by recent changes to the US nuclear posture, such as force modernization and declaratory policy.

Another participant suggested that a researcher could pick a number of ministers throughout a country's bureaucracy and ask open-ended questions about the motivation for their decisions. If the data are thorough enough, a full picture of the government's decision-making process might emerge. Foreign officials might be eager to discuss these topics. After the 2005 NPT Review Conference, one initiative convened officials from about 20 countries that had refrained from developing nuclear programs. The officials were asked whether it would be valuable to have an Article VI forum to discuss how the US nuclear posture affects their decisions, and it turned out there was a great deal of pent-up demand.

One important way to determine the effect of US posture on possible proliferators would be to hold extensive interviews with policymakers in Libya. Researchers could assess how the Libyans responded to negative security assurances, to the Clinton administration's adoption of calculated ambiguity, and to the Bush administration's NPR. This might give us a great deal more insight into how our declaratory policy affects our adversaries.

Finally, a conference participant asked that we keep in mind, "What constitutes impact?" While interviews may illuminate some internal government processes, US nuclear policy may also affect other countries' calculations in subtle ways that are not always visible. Officials from other countries may not even identify or express some of the impact of US nuclear policy—and it is these subtle changes that may have serious implications, affecting choices much farther down the road. As we research the way that US nuclear weapons policy impacts nonproliferation, it would help to be clear about what we are looking for.

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## The Stanley Foundation

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