

Dr. Barry M. Blechman



Nuclear Proliferation: Avoiding a Pandemic

THE CHALLENGE

There is serious risk that the international agreements and processes that have kept the number of nations armed with nuclear weapons fairly low are breaking down. Over the past ten years, three nations joined the six previously declared nuclear powers and a tenth is in the offing. Unless strong actions are taken during the first 18 months of the administration, we could see a world of twenty or even thirty nuclear-armed states by the 2020s. Meeting this challenge requires specific, near-term steps to shore up the current regime plus bold actions to move eventually to a world completely free of nuclear weapons.

THE CONTEXT

The US and other nations became seriously concerned about nuclear proliferation following China's test of a nuclear device in 1964. In the years that followed, they erected the existing anti-proliferation regime -- the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- its backbone; the Nuclear Suppliers Group to restrict trade in nuclear materials and dual-use items; and its regulatory organization -- the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Today, all three components are in jeopardy.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty has never been accepted universally. Three nuclear weapon states -- India, Israel, and Pakistan -- are not signatories. The Treaty also has notable flaws, demonstrated by North Korea's swift withdrawal from the Treaty, removal of IAEA safeguards on its civilian nuclear facility, and quick building and testing of a nuclear device. Moreover, after 40 years, the NPT's central tenet, a promise by China, France, UK, US, and the USSR to eventually eliminate their nuclear weapons in exchange for a pledge by all other countries not to seek weapon capabilities, is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. At the 2000 and 2005 Review Conferences and in a preparatory meeting for the 2010 Conference, the tensions between the two classes of countries were difficult to manage and little, if anything, was accomplished.

The Nuclear Suppliers Group, meanwhile, is challenged by the US-India Agreement on Civil Nuclear Cooperation. This agreement requires the US to seek an exception to the NSG rule prohibiting non-NPT signatory states from trading in nuclear and dual-use materials. Such an exception was granted in September for the US and India; if accepted by the US Congress, there is little reason to think that additional exceptions might not be granted for, say, Russia and Iran or China and Pakistan.

Finally, the IAEA is relatively weak, poorly resourced, and sometimes ignored. One NPT signatory, Iran, has been cited repeatedly for violating IAEA rules but only after years have sanctions begun to be applied and they appear to be too weak to change Iranian behavior -- demonstrating how countries can attain a virtual nuclear weapon status while remaining a signatory of the NPT. A broader problem is that IAEA inspectors can only visit declared nuclear facilities. As of May 30, 2008, the Additional Protocol, which would permit challenge inspections of sites chosen by the IAEA, had not yet been put into effect for most of the NPT signatories, including the United States.

Finally, if proliferation begins to accelerate, countries that are competent in nuclear technologies, but which have refrained from building a weapons program, could well join the bandwagon. These proliferators might include Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan, Ukraine, and others.

WHERE TO START

Re-state the goal of nuclear disarmament at every opportunity

During the campaign, both sides stated their support for the goal of nuclear disarmament. Strongly reaffirming this commitment as president would set the stage for success in various negotiations. Emphasizing the disarmament goal in the State of the Union and at other high-profile opportunities will encourage public support.

Bring the Six Nation Talks with North Korea to a successful conclusion

The United States will need China's help to keep the pressure on Pyongyang to fulfill its commitments and to ease concerns about its uranium enrichment program and nuclear exports. It will also need to work with South Korea, Japan, and the Congress to be sure there are sufficient carrots for North Korea to see benefit in continuing to cooperate.

Persuade Iran to contain its uranium enrichment program short of a weapons capability

Getting Iran to contain its uranium enrichment program short of a weapons capability is even more important. It requires the US to become a full participant in the talks, not just an interested bystander, and a promise of simultaneous concessions on our part – not just a partial lifting of sanctions, but also some movement on one or more of the baskets of goodies mentioned in last year's Paris Agreement. Over the longer term, a serious effort to place all nations' nuclear fuel cycles under multinational controls will be essential (see below).

Organize a meeting with Russia early to discuss nuclear matters

In the context of improvements in the US-Russia relationship overall, it may be possible to reach early agreements on extension of the START I verification provisions and on modification of the Moscow Treaty to reduce the number of operationally deployed nuclear warhead and to define more precisely the rules for counting such weapons. Moscow will demand as a quid-pro-quo that we agree to forego the planned missile defense site in Eastern Europe, which is a good idea in any event for technical reasons. Over the longer term, you should begin discussions of more ambitious steps to reduce and eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons, combined with steps to incorporate Russia in any missile defense program.

Begin talks with China

China has resisted a nuclear dialogue for years but perhaps may now be ready to begin informal discussions. The start of talks with China on nuclear issues would ease pressures in Japan to go nuclear.

Prepare for the NPT PrepCon (May 2009) and Review Conference (June 2010)

These conferences require thinking outside traditional lines to come up with bold initiatives that the US and other nuclear weapon states might embrace.

1. One issue is how to break the ten-year impasse in the Committee on Disarmament on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). China has linked that issue with discussions of a treaty to prohibit weapons in space. One idea would be to agree to discuss “rules of the road for space operations” in exchange for the beginnings of serious work on FMCT.
2. A second issue is a shift from national fuel cycles to placing all nations’ fuel cycles under multi-national organizations, perhaps public/private partnerships that would control the materials from mining through the removal of spent fuel from power reactors and safeguard them from diversion while in reactors.
3. A third and crucial issue is the possibility of beginning discussions with key nuclear weapon states for a treaty to eliminate all nuclear weapons, from all nations, by a date certain. Nothing would strengthen the hands of the nuclear weapon states at the 2010 NPT Review Conference as much as the announcement that they were beginning such talks.

WHAT'S ON THE LINE

The world has been spared the detonation of a nuclear device in anger for more than 60 years. It's not clear that this remarkable restraint can be sustained indefinitely, particularly in the event of wide-spread proliferation. The East-West conflict during the Cold War was an abstract, ideological struggle. Even then, we came perilously close to nuclear exchanges during the Berlin Crises in the 1950s, the Cuba Crisis in 1962, and at several other times. If nuclear weapons come into the hands of nations with histories of hatred and warfare and on-going disputes, deterrence becomes a far more risky proposition and the likelihood of nuclear warfare far greater. Just think of nuclear weapons in the hands of Israel and Iran in the context of a war between Israel and Hezbollah and Syria in Lebanon. Alternatively, think how unstable Northeast Asia might become if China, Japan, Korea, and Russia all have nuclear weapons. Moreover, every additional nuclear weapon state means a greater risk that nuclear devices come into the hands of terrorist organizations. America's security depends on the next administration placing the highest priority on reining in the nuclear danger.

Dr. Barry M. Blechman



Dr. Barry M. Blechman is the co-founder of the Henry L. Stimson Center and a Stimson Distinguished Fellow focused on nuclear disarmament. He was also the founder and president of DFI International Inc., a research and consulting company in Washington, DC, until its sale in 2007.

Dr. Blechman has more than forty years of distinguished service in the national security field. An expert on political/military policies, military strategy, and defense budgets and industries, he has worked in the Departments of State and Defense and at the Office of Management and Budget, and is a frequent consultant to the US Government on a wide range of subjects. Among other boards and commissions, Dr. Blechman served on the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States (1998-1999), the Defense Policy Board (2002-06), and the Mayor's Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program Advisory Committee in the District of Columbia (2004-06). He is currently a member of the Department of State Advisory Committee on Transformational Diplomacy. A Georgetown PhD in international relations, Dr. Blechman has written extensively on national security issues and has taught at several universities.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

For additional original research on American foreign policy, please read these original Stimson publications by Dr. Blechman:

Weapons of Mass Destruction: A New Paradigm for a New Century
(Stimson Center, 2000)

Defining Moment: The Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy Since 1989 (Stimson Center, 1998)

The Partnership Imperative: Maintaining American Leadership in a New Era
(Stimson Center, 1997)

The American Military in the Twenty-First Century (Stimson Center, 1993)