

Book Review

The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices.
Edited by Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn and Mitchell B. Reiss. The
Brookings Institution Press. Washington D.C. 2004. 367 p. Price not
available. ISBN: 0-8157-1331-2.

The US has always been at the forefront of the crusade against nuclear weapons proliferation. This crusade has been arrested by the 9/11 events wherein the present Republican administration has had to suddenly contend with the global war against terrorism. The Democratic Party is a strong advocate of nuclear non-proliferation and its nominee for president, John Kerry is no exception. If he were to defeat George W. Bush in the Presidential elections in November this year, the US policy on nuclear non-proliferation might undergo a major shift in view of the perceived connection between nuclear weapons and terrorism.

The present volume is innovative in that it tackles a hitherto not conceived idea - the breakout of non-‘rogue’ states from the NPT system. The mere fact that a liberal think-tank like the Brookings Institution has chosen to publish a policy study of a conservative think-tank like the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) approach to nuclear weapons proliferation suggests that a new agenda for arms control especially nuclear non-proliferation is sought to be fostered through bipartisan consensus. The three authors - Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn and Mitchell B. Reiss - have served in major capacities in the US government and their collaboration has enabled them to marshal the services of several eminent academics like Jonathan Pollack, formerly of the RAND Corporation and former Assistant Secretary of Defence, Walter B. Slocombe.

In the past, thinking in the US non-proliferation circles concentrated on ‘countries of concern’ like Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Libya for their clandestine development of nuclear weapons even though they are signatories to the NPT as non-nuclear weapon status. In the present volume, only Syria falls in that category.

To perceive of a reconsideration of nuclear choices by staunch friends and allies of the US vindicates India’s position that the NPT is fatally flawed and needs recasting. Unfortunately, American thinking continues to adhere to the core edifice of the NPT system. The present volume is no exception; it seeks deterrence of

states that might contemplate a breakout from the NPT. The Bush Administration's neo-conservative group is obsessed with global terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. It has paid lip service to arms control and nuclear non-proliferation in general but this could change if Bush were to be re-elected.

The present volume examines the nuclear calculations involved in eight countries - Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Of late, the IAEA has voiced concerns about South Korea developing the very select technology of laser isotope separation of uranium.

Interestingly, the case studies relate to states that have all signed the NPT like Iran, Iraq and North Korea but have been suspected of trying to develop nuclear weapons. Iraq's nuclear weapons were decimated during the Gulf War of 1991 but Iran is perceived as being perilously close to developing at least six nuclear weapons according to Israeli intelligence sources. This would have dire consequences on its neighbours, the Sunni majority Saudi Arabia and Syria. The proliferation by purchase path, they are perceived to contemplate, may destabilise the Arab world, as Israel is presently the sole possessor of nuclear weapons in West Asia. Egypt, as the acknowledged political, cultural and economic leader of the Arab World, has, since Anwar Sadat, maintained friendly ties with Israel. Robert Einhorn with his considerable experience in the Clinton administration analyses why Egypt may choose to gravitate to nuclear status. Ellen Laipson seeks to analyse how nuclear weapons with Syria may improve its precarious security.

Jenifer Mackby and Walter B. Slocombe trace how Germany as the potential proliferator of the 1950s and 1960s, has now reached the status of the least likely candidate that will proliferate in this century. Similar arguments could hold in the case of Japan so long as the US-Japan security alliance holds.

Kurt Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara have traced rather convincingly Japan's 'thinking of the unthinkable'. The chapter by Kurt M. Campbell entitled "Reconsidering a Nuclear Future: Why Countries Might Cross Over to the Other Side" is thought-provoking in that it puts into perspective what one has hitherto not found in the conventional analysis of nuclear non-proliferation. To quote: "For nearly half a century, a central aspect of the US diplomacy and national security strategy has been to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. Over the last decade, this pursuit has focused primarily on stopping unsavoury regimes such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq from acquiring or developing nuclear capability... yet for all the attention given to these usual suspects, there has been remarkably little

consideration of another class of future potential proliferators: those states that in the past chose to forgo the nuclear option. . . .”

In this category, according to the author, are countries like Egypt, Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Syria, Taiwan and Turkey. Except for the fact that Germany and Japan attempted to build nuclear weapons during the Second World War, there is little to suggest that these vanquished countries, who have become economic giants, would flirt with nuclear weapons so long as the US security alliance remains in force.

As far as South Korea is concerned, its motivation could be North Korea’s brazen violation of NPT norms. However, the US security alliance would restrain Seoul’s attempts in spite of recent reports to the contrary. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are Islamic countries that have different attitudes to the only nuclear state in West Asia - Israel. Turkey, an ally of France, is keen to enter the European Union and is unlikely to ruffle the feathers of the Western alliance. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are bedevilled by Islamic fundamentalism and closely tied to the United States. That leaves Syria, which has deep resentment towards Israel.

How far Russia, a close ally of Syria, would tolerate Syria’s flirtation with nuclear weapons warrants further analysis. An interesting quote by Thomas W. Lippman in his essays on Saudi Arabia merits attention, wherein Osama bin Laden is reported to have said: “it is the duty of Muslims to possess these weapons.” In view of the fact that Saudi Arabia’s ally, Pakistan, has these weapons, and Iran is attempting to procure these weapons, bin Laden’s assertion need to be examined further.

The essays in this volume are unique and forthright in that they cast aspersions on the very stability of the non-proliferation regime. The case studies of countries that have been rather closely tied to the Western countries except for Syria are thought provoking. The study on Taiwan merits immediate consideration because of its permanent conflict with its neighbour China, across the Straits. If China were to contemplate immediate military action in the event of an ideological crisis, Taiwan might have to resort to nuclear weapon use in a ‘last resort’ mode *a la* Israel. Derek J. Mitchell’s study in the volume entitled, “Taiwan’s Hsin Chu Program: Deterrence Abandonment and Honour” is a very timely one. He has forcefully brought out the fact that if the US had not intervened in the early 1980s, Taiwan might well have gone nuclear. In that period, Israel, South Africa and Taiwan were characterised as ‘pariah’ states. They had actively collaborated in the development of nuclear weapons with the tacit support of the US.

In their concluding essay, Kurt Campbell and Robert Einhorn have aptly observed that there may be no urgency with regard to these states 'tipping out' of the NPT and developing nuclear weapons. The study, however, could have been more convincing if it were to have suggested what political factors could motivate these states to opt out of the US-sponsored alliances and seek an independent nuclear deterrence.

However, nuclear non-proliferation has to be recast in the light of the major advances that technology has caused. For instance, laser isotope separation, presently confined to countries like the US, Israel and China, has found its way into South Korea. As a result, South Korea could make a mockery of CTBT by separating weapons grade plutonium from reactor grade. Also, the United States could choose to selectively proliferate in countries like Turkey, to arrest the threat of Iran, especially in Central Asia.

One of the major lacunae in this study has been to perpetuate the theological perceptions of the US Congress and the Democratic Party, that states closely tied to the US save for Syria, have independent security perspectives. One then wonders if countries like India who have challenged the NPT edifice do not also have the right to their nuclear weapons and independently enhance their security vis-à-vis recalcitrant neighbours.

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