

## The New Challenges of Nuclear Proliferation

*Amidst growing concern about Iran's nuclear weapons program and with the six-party talks at a standstill, a Trilateral Commission task force was established to examine the erosion of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and what the world's leaders can do to halt and reverse the spread of nuclear weapons. The four task force participants—Graham Allison, Hervé de Carmoy, Thérèse Delpech, and Lee Chung-min—presented their recommendations in a session chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The full report of the task force was published in September 2006 as Nuclear Proliferation: Risk and Responsibility, and Henry Kissinger's foreword is excerpted below.*

There is no greater challenge to the global nuclear order today than the impending proliferation of nuclear weapons and the increasing likelihood that terrorists may conduct a nuclear 9/11, devastating one of the great cities of the world. The papers presented in this report from the Trilateral Commission's 2006 annual meeting in Tokyo offer a comprehensive and insightful overview of this urgent challenge.

During the Cold War, a balance of terror was precariously maintained between the two superpowers. Leaders of both knew that their first imperative was to avoid a nuclear Armageddon, of which both would be the first victim. Even then, the disparity between the vast consequences of a decision to use nuclear weapons on the one hand and any conceivable political outcome that could be achieved on the other hand had a paralyzing effect on decision making. The deliberate choice to use nuclear weapons in a preventive or preemptive manner defied the principles of rational conduct, since it guaranteed casualties among the civilian populations of both superpowers that were beyond comprehension.

If one imagines a world of tens of nations with nuclear weapons and major powers trying to balance their own deterrent equations, plus the

deterrent equations of the subsystems, deterrence calculation would become impossibly complicated. To assume that, in such a world, nuclear catastrophe could be avoided would be unrealistic.

As the world's unmatched military superpower, the United States has a unique role in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. The Bush administration's National Security Strategy explicitly warns that "there are few greater threats than a terrorist attack with WMD" and that "the greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction-and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack."

But a preemptive strategy for using force to deny the spread of nuclear weapons is based on assumptions that cannot be proved when they are made. When the scope for action is greatest, knowledge is at a minimum. When knowledge has been acquired, the scope for preemption has often disappeared.

The tension, therefore, is between preemptive and preventive uses of force. Preemption applies to an adversary possessing a capacity to do great, potentially irreversible, damage, coupled with the demonstrated will to do so imminently. The right to use force unilaterally in such circumstances has been accepted for centuries.

Preventive uses of force are measures to forestall the emergence of a threat not yet imminent, but capable, at some point in the future, of being potentially overwhelming. Preventive force is not an issue applicable to relations with an established major nuclear adversary. First-strike threats against established nuclear powers might, if such powers felt their weapons were very vulnerable, tempt them to make a preemptive strike of their own. A policy of using preventive force against aspiring nuclear powers, however, creates incentives for them to acquire nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible and, if thwarted, to develop chemical or biological weapons-either for their own security or as a safety net for assertive or revolutionary policies.

All major powers have a responsibility to take the challenge of preventing nuclear proliferation seriously. A common approach may be possible because what used to be called the "great powers" have nothing to gain by military conflict with each other. They are all dependent on the global economic system. They should recognize that, after the explosion of just one nuclear bomb in one of their great cities, their publics will demand an extreme form of preventive diplomacy to assure that this can never happen again. Without waiting for such a catastrophe, statesmen should now be building a viable international order that will prevent such nightmares from ever occurring.

As the papers in this report argue persuasively, the entire nonproliferation regime is now at risk. North Korea and Iran threaten to become nuclear weapons states. Osama bin Laden seeks nuclear weapons to realize his stated goal of killing millions of American citizens. At the conclusion of a most productive discussion of the Tokyo meeting, members of the Commission were united in the hope that this report will spur all our governments to greater urgency in combating this grave and growing threat.

### **Nuclear Proliferation: Risk and Responsibility** Task Force Report #60

*Nuclear Proliferation: Risk and Responsibility*, the full report of the Trilateral Commission task force on nuclear nonproliferation, was published in September 2006. Information on obtaining the report is available on the Trilateral Commission website at <[www.trilateral.org](http://www.trilateral.org)>.

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