Acquiring a Bomb Does Not an Aggressor Make

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/08/acquiring-a-bomb-does-not-an-aggressor-make/

ROBERT W. MURRAY, MAR 8 2013

In yet another example of its limited abilities to impact international outcomes, the United Nations Security Council again this week agreed to sanction North Korea. The move comes after the North Koreans ramped up their anti-American rhetoric, successfully tested a nuclear device, and also tested a missile said to be capable of reaching the United States. In response, the international community's outrage was expressed by the Security Council, who is hoping that sanctions will deter the North Korean's from further threating nuclear war, or developing nuclear technology.

Between the actions of Iran and North Korea, attention in recent years has been given to the prospect of nuclear war, or at the least the use of a nuclear weapon, if either or both of these regimes were to master the technology necessary to launch a nuclear attack. To date, neither Iran or North Korea have reached the point where a nuclear strike (especially on western Europe or North America) is possible but the level of alarm over the seemingly increasing prospect is earning the ire of many states that are possible targets of an Iranian or North Korean attack. But just how real is the prospect of a nuclear strike in the contemporary international system?

Firstly, I take great exception to those who claim Iran or North Korea are somehow more likely to use nuclear arms than the United States, India or any other nuclear power. Nuclear deterrence on regional and international levels has successfully prevented the use of these weapons since 1945. The sole reason the Americans were able to drop two bombs in August of 1945 is that no other state had the capability to retaliate at the time. As soon as the Soviet Union developed a bomb of their own, deterrence equations immediately made their use a virtual impossibility. Since that time, the world has seen the emergence of other nuclear powers, some with incredibly undemocratic domestic political systems, but none has used nuclear arms. I have yet to see a convincing argument capable of explaining why Iran is less rational than Pakistan or why North Korea is crazier than China when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons.

There is a different line of argument that can be applied to the uneasiness that naturally comes with nuclear arms, being the polarity of the system. In the 2×2 nature of a bipolar system, balancing behavior and relative gains analysis are much easier, knowing precisely who the two poles and their allies are. Mutual Assured Destruction concepts are obvious to both sides, so while proxy wars may break out, the chances of the two superpowers launching nuclear arms makes little sense. In a unipolar system, the actions and behavior of the hegemon are likely to play a large role in determining the attitudes towards developing and using nuclear arms. Throughout the unipolar moment in the post-Cold War era, notice that it is those states that are typically anti-American trying to assert themselves against the hegemon in an effort to either balance or gain greater political prominence in a system dominated by one western power. The least stable structure of the system in all ways, but particularly in nuclear arms equations, is a multipolar system. In a system dominated by 3 or more poles, deterring and balancing nuclear arms becomes incredibly difficult, as perceptions about threat and relative gains are unclear and often misperceptions are more easily made.

In the immediate wake of the Cold War, John Mearsheimer was heavily criticized for suggesting that the best way to maintain a stable balance of power and deterring any one state from using nuclear arms was to promote proliferation, rather than trying to limit them. Mearsheimer was seen as a monster for suggesting more nuclear weapons was a good idea, but in fact, Mearsheimer's mistake was not moral, but rather, it was a false assumption that a multipolar structure would emerge rather than a unipolar structure. If Mearsheimer had been correct as the immediate post-

Cold War period was multipolar in character, proliferation would have been an effective strategy to guarantee no states would try to take advantage of the unclear political situation that the fall of the Soviet Union brought.

The system is going through a transition and a multipolar system seems to be the likeliest outcome, though exactly when that might occur is unknown. Even so, in the current structure of the international system, a nuclear attack by Iran or North Korea is incredibly improbable. Where our ability to analyze stops, however, is whether either of these regimes (or any other existing nuclear regime) would sell nuclear technology to a non-state actor. I will leave that problem to the wisdom of terrorism experts.

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