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Pulling Back from the Nuclear Brink: Reducing and Countering Nuclear Threats

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Schneider, Barry R., and William L. Dowdy, eds. *Pulling Back from the Nuclear Brink: Reducing and Countering Nuclear Threats*. London: Frank Cass, 1998. 309pp. \$52.50

It is conventional wisdom in some circles that with the demise of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons may no longer be a major factor in the calculus of international relations. This survey of varying perspectives on nuclear proliferation, compiled by Barry R. Schneider and William L. Dowdy, credibly challenges that arguably premature assumption. The editors are, respectively, associate professor of international relations in the Department of Future Conflict Studies, and associate professor of Middle Eastern studies in the Department of International Security Studies, at the Air War College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Both have devoted a considerable portion of their professional lives to international security issues.

This book grew out of a conference on nuclear proliferation issues jointly sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Air War College, held on 26–27 April 1996 at Maxwell. The conference involved numerous nuclear-proliferation experts, many of whom served as principal speakers and presenters. The group was composed of diplomats, regional specialists, policy makers, academics, scientists, senior military officers, and defense professionals from several nations. Many of their papers are contained in this analytical compilation, and all contributors to the book were conference participants. The subject matter includes lessons from previous nonproliferation experience, recent successful nonproliferation efforts, continuing proliferation challenges and risks, progress achieved to date in nonproliferation

programs, discussion of possible nonproliferation roles for nongovernmental organizations, and potential counteractions against emerging nuclear states.

As outlined in this work, two seminal events in the late twentieth century had major impacts on global nuclear proliferation: the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the continuing spread of fairly easily attainable nuclear weapons, components, and technology. The two events are, of course, not unrelated. In that regard, leakage of weapons technology and expertise to foreign buyers clearly remains the most worrisome aspect of the current serious Russian internal problems. However, that said, and contrary to the expectations of many analysts, nuclear technology has not spread as rapidly as anticipated. Contributors to this book speculate that this reality is, not surprisingly, the result of multiple, complex, and interacting factors. These include the considerable cost of fielding nuclear weapons, concerns regarding possible preemption by adversaries, fear of isolation by the international community, and growing doubts as to the actual utility of nuclear weapons as deterrents much less as war-fighting tools—particularly when weighed against inherent risks.

The preceding cautiously optimistic observations aside, there is a clear recognition by the contributors to this book that there has already emerged a group of nation states that may well prove to be catalysts for nuclear confrontation in the not-too-distant future: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, Iraq, and possibly Libya and Syria. Moreover, despite the perhaps understandable balance-of-power motives, there is also the unresolved question of the potentially dangerous and destabilizing nuclear weapons stockpiles possessed by Israel,

India, and Pakistan. There also remains what could be the central international policy issue, regarding what to do if a state is discovered in violation of a previous agreement not to develop nuclear weapons.

Several short case studies are given of states that have, variously, developed and stockpiled nuclear weapons, or initiated nuclear weapons development programs and subsequently canceled them, or elected to negotiate regional nuclear-free zones. The book offers valuable insights into factors that seem to motivate these diverse policy choices. The lesson herein may be that no two states react similarly when faced with the nuclear weapons procurement dilemma. Some essays present overviews of evolving national policies on proliferation and nonproliferation as declared by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, and of the nuclear arms-reduction program in Russia.

In addition, an American specialist provocatively analyzes the seemingly obdurate refusal by the People's Republic of China to respond to international pressure and previous agreements not to transfer ballistic missile and nuclear weapons technologies abroad. The author's conclusion is that the Chinese government is steadily losing control of its provinces, its military-industrial complex, and the People's Liberation Army. Thus there are emerging in China increasingly independent actors implementing contradictory foreign policies regarding weapons-technology transfers and the considerable profits to be made therefrom.

Another contributor argues that high-technology precision guided conventional munitions (PGMs) may well obviate the need to acquire or employ nuclear weapons, as the destructive effects of PGMs are essentially the same

and thus have made the former both irrelevant and too dangerous.

The technical data presented here regarding nuclear weapons and weapons production are probably sufficient to inform but not overwhelm the nonspecialist. However, there is also a virtual blizzard of acronyms throughout the book, describing weaponry, research and development programs, and weapons-related agencies of various stripes. Initially, this may prove somewhat daunting to the layperson, but patience will be rewarded, as most entries are explained.

The not inconsiderable utility of the book would have been further enhanced by an article that summarized the underlying themes of the work and categorized the diverse viewpoints expressed by the contributing authors. Such an article would have been of considerable value to a non-expert student of nuclear proliferation issues.

The major strength of this work is that it provides a diversity of viewpoints regarding nuclear proliferation issues, ranging from enthusiastic optimism about the future to cautious pessimism. Moreover, it also quite realistically, in this writer's view, leaves many important issues explained but unresolved. In this regard, and possibly closest to the mark, one author contrasts two cultures that are currently grappling with nuclear proliferation issues, and with each other— diplomatic activism and nonproliferation versus military preparedness and counterproliferation. Other contributors observe that nuclear proliferation will probably never be completely resolved. One hopes that within these parameters a process will evolve that at least minimizes the real risks inherent in nuclear weapons.

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