How Nuclear Weapons Can Keep You Safe

BY JONATHAN TEPPERMAN 8/28/09 AT 8:00 PM

On Sept. 24, President Barack Obama will bring together 14 world leaders for a special U.N. Security Council meeting in New York. On the agenda: how to rid the world of nuclear weapons. The summit is the latest step in the administration's campaign to eliminate nukes, a priority Obama stressed on the campaign trail and formally announced in April during his speech in Prague. U.S. attempts to stop Iran from acquiring the bomb and to pry the weapons out of North Korea's fingers are also key parts of this campaign.

These efforts are all grounded in the same proposition: that, as Obama has said several times, nuclear weapons represent the "gravest threat" to U.S. security. This argument has a lot going for it. It's strongly intuitive, as anyone who's ever seen pictures of Hiroshima or Nagasaki knows. It's also popular; U.S. presidents have been making similar noises since the Eisenhower administration, and halting the spread of nukes (if not eliminating them altogether) is one of the few things Obama, Vladimir Putin, Hu Jintao, and Benjamin Netanyahu can all agree on. There's just one problem with the reasoning: it may well be wrong.

A growing and compelling body of research suggests that nuclear weapons may not, in fact, make the world more dangerous, as Obama and most people assume. The bomb may actually make us safer. In this era of rogue states and transnational terrorists, that idea sounds so obviously wrongheaded that few politicians or policymakers are willing to entertain it. But that's a mistake. Knowing the truth about nukes would have a profound impact on government policy. Obama's idealistic campaign, so out of character for a pragmatic administration, may be unlikely to get far (past presidents have tried and failed). But it's not even clear he should make the effort. There are more important measures the U.S. government can and should take to make the real world safer, and these mustn't be ignored in the name of a dreamy ideal (a nuke-free planet) that's both unrealistic and possibly undesirable.

Try Newsweek for only $1.25 per week
The argument that nuclear weapons can be agents of peace as well as destruction rests on two deceptively simple observations. First, nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945. Second, there's never been a nuclear, or even a nonnuclear, war between two states that possess them. Just stop for a second and think about that: it's hard to overstate how remarkable it is, especially given the singular viciousness of the 20th century. As Kenneth Waltz, the leading "nuclear optimist" and a professor emeritus of political science at UC Berkeley puts it, "We now have 64 years of experience since Hiroshima. It's striking and against all historical precedent that for that substantial period, there has not been any war among nuclear states."

To understand why—and why the next 64 years are likely to play out the same way—you need to start by recognizing that all states are rational on some basic level. Their leaders may be stupid, petty, venal, even evil, but they tend to do things only when they're pretty sure they can get away with them. Take war: a country will start a fight only when it's almost certain it can get what it wants at an acceptable price. Not even Hitler or Saddam waged wars they didn't think they could win. The problem historically has been that leaders often make the wrong gamble and underestimate the other side—and millions of innocents pay the price.

Nuclear weapons change all that by making the costs of war obvious, inevitable, and unacceptable. Suddenly, when both sides have the ability to turn the other to ashes with the push of a button—and everybody knows it—the basic math shifts. Even the craziest tin-pot dictator is forced to accept that war with a nuclear state is unwinnable and thus not worth the effort. As Waltz puts it, "Why fight if you can't win and might lose everything?"

Why indeed? The iron logic of deterrence and mutually assured destruction is so compelling, it's led to what's known as the nuclear peace: the virtually unprecedented stretch since the end of World War II in which all the world's major powers have avoided coming to blows. They did fight proxy wars, ranging from Korea to Vietnam to Angola to Latin America. But these never matched the furious destruction of full-on, great-power war (World War II alone was responsible for some 50 million to 70 million deaths). And since the end of the Cold War, such bloodshed has declined precipitously. Meanwhile, the nuclear powers have scrupulously avoided direct combat, and there's very good reason to think they always will. There have been some near misses, but a close look at these cases is fundamentally reassuring—because in each instance, very different leaders all came to the same safe conclusion.
Take the mother of all nuclear standoffs: the Cuban missile crisis. For 13 days in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union each threatened the other with destruction. But both countries soon stepped back from the brink when they recognized that a war would have meant curtains for everyone. As important as the fact that they did is the reason why: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's aide Fyodor Burlatsky said later on, "It is impossible to win a nuclear war, and both sides realized that, maybe for the first time."

The record since then shows the same pattern repeating: nuclear-armed enemies slide toward war, then pull back, always for the same reasons. The best recent example is India and Pakistan, which fought three bloody wars after independence before acquiring their own nukes in 1998. Getting their hands on weapons of mass destruction didn't do anything to lessen their animosity. But it did dramatically mellow their behavior. Since acquiring atomic weapons, the two sides have never fought another war, despite severe provocations (like Pakistani-based terrorist attacks on India in 2001 and 2008). They have skirmished once. But during that flare-up, in Kashmir in 1999, both countries were careful to keep the fighting limited and to avoid threatening the other's vital interests. Sumit Ganguly, an Indiana University professor and coauthor of the forthcoming India, Pakistan, and the Bomb, has found that on both sides, officials' thinking was strikingly similar to that of the Russians and Americans in 1962. The prospect of war brought Delhi and Islamabad face to face with a nuclear holocaust, and leaders in each country did what they had to do to avoid it.

Nuclear pessimists—and there are many—insist that even if this pattern has held in the past, it's crazy to rely on it in the future, for several reasons. The first is that today's nuclear wannabes are so completely unhinged, you'd be mad to trust them with a bomb. Take the sybaritic Kim Jong Il, who's never missed a chance to demonstrate his battiness, or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has denied the Holocaust and promised the destruction of Israel, and who, according to some respected Middle East scholars, runs a messianic martyrdom cult that would welcome nuclear obliteration. These regimes are the ultimate rogues, the thinking goes—and there's no deterring rogues.

But are Kim and Ahmadinejad really scarier and crazier than were Stalin and Mao? It might look that way from Seoul or Tel Aviv, but history says otherwise. Khrushchev, remember, threatened to "bury" the United States, and in 1957, Mao blithely declared that a nuclear war with America wouldn't be so bad because even "if half of mankind died … the whole world would become socialist." Pyongyang and Tehran support terrorism—but so did Moscow and
Beijing. And as for seeming suicidal, Michael Desch of the University of Notre Dame points out that Stalin and Mao are the real record holders here: both were responsible for the deaths of some 20 million of their own citizens.

Yet when push came to shove, their regimes balked at nuclear suicide, and so would today's international bogeymen. For all of Ahmadinejad's antics, his power is limited, and the clerical regime has always proved rational and pragmatic when its life is on the line. Revolutionary Iran has never started a war, has done deals with both Washington and Jerusalem, and sued for peace in its war with Iraq (which Saddam started) once it realized it couldn't win. North Korea, meanwhile, is a tiny, impoverished, family-run country with a history of being invaded; its overwhelming preoccupation is survival, and every time it becomes more belligerent it reverses itself a few months later (witness last week, when Pyongyang told Seoul and Washington it was ready to return to the bargaining table). These countries may be brutally oppressive, but nothing in their behavior suggests they have a death wish.

Still, even if Iran or North Korea are deterrable, nuclear pessimists fear they'll give or sell their deadly toys to terrorists, who aren't—for it's hard to bomb a group with no return address. Yet look closely, and the risk of a WMD handoff starts to seem overblown. For one thing, assuming Iran is able to actually build a nuke, Desch explains that "it doesn't make sense that they'd then give something they regard as central to their survival to groups like Hizbullah, over which they have limited control. As for Al Qaeda, they don't even share common interests. Why would the mullahs give Osama bin Laden the crown jewels?" To do so would be fatal, for Washington has made it very clear that it would regard any terrorist use of a WMD as an attack by the country that supplied it—and would respond accordingly.

A much greater threat is that a nuclear North Korea or Pakistan could collapse and lose control of its weapons entirely. Yet here again history offers some comfort. China acquired its first nuke in 1964, just two years before it descended into the mad chaos of the Cultural Revolution, when virtually every Chinese institution was threatened—except for its nuclear infrastructure, which remained secure. "It was nearly a coup," says Desch, "yet with all the unrest, nobody ever thought that there might be an unauthorized nuclear use." The Soviets' weapons were also kept largely safe (with U.S. help) during the breakup of their union in the early '90s. And in recent years Moscow has greatly upped its defense spending (by 20 to 30 percent a year), using some of the cash to modernize and protect its arsenal.
As for Pakistan, it has taken numerous precautions to ensure that its own weapons are insulated from the country's chaos, installing complicated firing mechanisms to prevent a launch by lone radicals, for example, and instituting special training and screening for its nuclear personnel to ensure they're not infiltrated by extremists. Even if the Pakistani state did collapse entirely—the nightmare scenario—the chance of a Taliban bomb would still be remote. Desch argues that the idea that terrorists "could use these weapons radically underestimates the difficulty of actually operating a modern nuclear arsenal. These things need constant maintenance and they're very easy to disable. So the idea that these things could be stuffed into a gunnysack and smuggled across the Rio Grande is preposterous."

The risk of an arms race—with, say, other Persian Gulf states rushing to build a bomb after Iran got one—is a bit harder to dispel. Once again, however, history is instructive. "In 64 years, the most nuclear-weapons states we've ever had is 12," says Waltz. "Now with North Korea we're at nine. That's not proliferation; that's spread at glacial pace." Nuclear weapons are so controversial and expensive that only countries that deem them absolutely critical to their survival go through the extreme trouble of acquiring them. That's why South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan voluntarily gave theirs up in the early '90s, and why other countries like Brazil and Argentina dropped nascent programs. This doesn't guarantee that one or more of Iran's neighbors—Egypt or Saudi Arabia, say—might not still go for the bomb if Iran manages to build one. But the risks of a rapid spread are low, especially given Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent suggestion that the United States would extend a nuclear umbrella over the region, as Washington has over South Korea and Japan, if Iran does complete a bomb. If one or two Gulf states nonetheless decided to pursue their own weapon, that still might not be so disastrous, given the way that bombs tend to mellow behavior.

Put this all together and nuclear weapons start to seem a lot less frightening. So why have so few people in Washington recognized this? Most of us suffer from what Desch calls a nuclear phobia, an irrational fear that's grounded in good evidence—nuclear weapons are terrifying—but that keeps us from making clear, coldblooded calculations about just how dangerous possessing them actually is. The logic of nuclear peace rests on a scary bargain: you accept a small chance that something extremely bad will happen in exchange for a much bigger chance that something very bad—conventional war—won't happen. This may well be a rational bet to take, especially if that first risk is very small indeed. But it's a tough case to make to the public.
Still, it's worth keeping in mind as Obama coaxes the world toward nuclear disarmament—especially because he's destined to fail. The Russians and Chinese have shown little inclination to give up their nukes, for several reasons—chief among them that the U.S. is vastly more powerful in conventional terms, and these weapons are thus their main way of leveling the playing field. Moscow and Beijing would likely be unmoved by anything short of a unilateral U.S. disarmament, which no one in Washington contemplates. And even if Russia and China (and France, Britain, Israel, India, and Pakistan) could be coaxed to abandon their weapons, we'd still live with the fear that any of them could quickly and secretly rearm. Meanwhile, the U.S. campaign to slow Iran's weapons program and reverse North Korea's is also unlikely to work. States want nukes if they feel their survival is in jeopardy. The Obama administration may have dropped talk of regime change, but it continues to threaten Pyongyang and Tehran. That ensures the standoff will continue, for so long as these states feel insecure, they'll never give up their nuclear dreams.

Given this reality, Washington would be wiser to focus on making the world we actually live in—the nuclear world—safer. This involves several steps, few of which the Obama administration has mentioned but which it should emphasize in its Nuclear Posture Review due at the end of the year. To start, the logic of deterrence works only if everybody knows who has a nuclear arsenal and thus can't be attacked—as Peter Sellers puts it in Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, "The whole point of a Doomsday Machine is lost if you keep it a secret!" So the United States should make sure everyone knows roughly who has what, to keep anyone from getting dangerous ideas. On a similar note, the United States should put more effort into advancing what Harvard's Graham Allison calls "nuclear forensics," an emerging discipline that would allow scientists to trace any nuclear device exploded anywhere, by anybody—be it a state or a terrorist—back to its manufacturer and point of origin (since this would convince rogues they can't risk selling bombs to bad guys).

A politically tougher but equally important step would be to make sure that any nuclear weapons state has what's called a "survivable second strike option," a means of ensuring that even if attacked, it could still shoot back, since this is the best way to persuade its enemies not to bother trying to incapacitate it through a surprise attack (as Joseph Cirincione of the Ploughshares Fund points out, this can be done with a small arsenal and need not necessitate a big buildup). Finally, Washington should continue doing what it's done with Russia and Pakistan to help those regimes keep their weapons safe. The administration has announced plans to help secure loose nukes, and that's all to the good. But it should be prepared to offer the same technology and training to other new nuclear states if they emerge—even if they're U.S.
enemies. Critics will scream that doing so would reward bad behavior and encourage it in others. It might. But it would also help keep everyone safe from an accidental launch, which seems a lot more important. None of these steps will be easy to pitch to the public, even for a president as gifted and nimble as Obama. But as he heads into a rare nuclear summit in late September, the least he could do is hold a frank debate on what's really the best strategy for securing the world from—or with—these weapons. Given the stakes, he can hardly afford not to.