

Chapter 20

Introduction



Steve Fetter

In the second panel on Perspectives on Nuclear Non-Proliferation, experts from the Israeli government, a South Korean non-governmental organization, and Pugwash provided interesting and contrasting views on the role played by ambiguity in nuclear security and nonproliferation.

Israel maintains a policy of deliberate ambiguity concerning its nuclear weapons program. Although Israel is widely believed to maintain a substantial nuclear stockpile, it neither confirms nor denies the possession of nuclear weapons. Israel believes ambiguity is stabilizing because the likelihood that Israel has an unacknowledged nuclear arsenal serves as a potent deterrent, while avoiding the cascade of nuclear proliferation in the region that likely would result if an arsenal were acknowledged officially. Israel insists that it is fully committed to nonproliferation but cannot join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) because violations by Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Iran have demonstrated the inability of the NPT to prevent proliferation in the region. It also points to the use of chemical weapons by Syria and other countries as requiring a treaty that bans all weapons of mass destruction from the Middle East. In making these arguments, Israel does not acknowledge the role that its imputed nuclear weapons have played in stimulating interest in nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction by other countries in the region. There is increasing reason to question whether ambiguity is stabilizing. Iraq, Iran, and Syria did indeed pursue clandestine nuclear programs. Ambiguity has undermined Israel's position in international debate on nuclear security and nonproliferation. Israel has not signed the NPT and has generally linked this to progress on broader regional security issues and a durable peace settlement in the Middle East. David Nusbaum notes that past violations of the NPT by Iran, its failure to provide a full accounting of its nuclear weapon activities, and its acquisition and continued maintenance of relevant equipment and knowledge indicate that Iranian promises cannot be trusted and that Iran's nuclear program

S. Fetter (✉)
University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA
e-mail: sfetter@umd.edu

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can be restored. But it would be difficult to argue that the region would be safer or more stable with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in danger of dissolving completely. Nusbaum presents the Israeli position in its most cogent form.

Unlike Israel, North Korea visibly demonstrated its nuclear capability with a series of nuclear tests, including a high-yield explosion in September 2017 that North Korea claimed was a thermonuclear weapon. North Korea demonstrated the potential to deliver nuclear weapons with a series of missile tests, culminating in the November 2017 launch of a missile capable of reaching the continental United States. But a different kind of ambiguity is at play in the negotiations between the United States and North Korea. As Young-Ho Park notes, North Korea and the United States have both committed to “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” but they have different definitions of “denuclearization.” The lack of specificity has enabled the parties to lower tensions, at least temporarily, and to claim they are working toward a common goal. But the same lack of a common definition and understanding will make progress difficult. Negotiated denuclearization is possible only if North Korea agrees to a definition close to that offered by the United States—in particular, to declare and verifiably dismantle all nuclear weapons and to declare and place under safeguards all nuclear materials and nuclear facilities. But Park argues that the North Korean government values its nuclear program more than it values the general welfare of its citizens, and for that reason it is unlikely to agree to true denuclearization. Park sees only two alternatives to negotiated denuclearization: forced denuclearization or living with a nuclear North Korea, neither of which is desirable.

Trust is the missing element for Middle-East peace, according to Paolo Cotta-Ramusino. Although the United States and Israel focus on Iran’s nuclear program as the motivation for sanctions, it is clear that a broader distrust of and opposition to the Iranian government is the basis for their efforts to undermine the JCPOA. Cotta-Ramusino also notes that efforts in South Asia to eliminate ambiguity about the circumstances under which nuclear weapons would be used have laid the seeds for disaster. India has promised not to use nuclear weapons first but has pledged to retaliate massively to any nuclear attack on India, including on Indian forces. Pakistan has announced it would use nuclear weapons first to stop and repel an invasion by India, and to make this threat credible has developed and deployed a large number of tactical nuclear weapons for use against enemy forces on Pakistani soil. This is similar to NATO’s plan during the Cold War for stopping a Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. A key difference is that Pakistan’s faith that its nuclear arsenal would deter an Indian invasion has given it the confidence to support insurgents and other attacks against India. Pakistan could miscalculate, supporting or engaging in actions that India deems unacceptable threats to its national security that warrant a forceful military response; and India could miscalculate by responding in a manner forceful enough to threaten the security of Pakistan and prompt it to use nuclear weapons to stop India. It is not difficult to see how this could lead to rapid escalation and nuclear attacks and counterattacks that could kill hundreds of millions in the densely populated cities of South Asia.