

US nuclear proliferation policy during the Clinton administration

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During the Clinton administration, US policy on nuclear weapons and their proliferation underwent no significant change from the metastable stalemate (Leo Szilard's term) that evolved between 1945 and the early 1960's.

The assumptions of a bipolar US-USSR nuclear arms standoff and of a scramble for nuclear weapons by other powers for reasons of prestige and security, combined with US determination to keep and expand its nuclear arsenal, were deeply ingrained in US policy by 1948, before any other country had or could deliver nuclear weapons.

The Clinton administration was a time, fifty years after the atomic bombing of Japan, when new thinking on nuclear weapons in the world was needed and appropriate, as the primary assumption of US nuclear policy, that of a bipolar arms race, was at least minimized. On the other hand, hundreds of tons of plutonium and enriched uranium suitable for nuclear weapons existed all over the world, raising the possibility of theft. Modern technology made nuclear weapons manufacture easy compared to fifty years ago. There were eight nuclear powers and many countries were technologically capable of acquiring nuclear weapons on short notice.

Contrary to the claims of his detractors, Clinton responded in ways typical of his predecessors to the major proliferation crises during his term in office. The results were often ineffective, owing both to a lack of interest by Clinton (a brilliant advocate of his favorite projects) and to the customary Congressional ignorance of the issues. For example, Clinton encouraged action under the Nunn-Lugar Act of 1989 to assist Russia in disposing of its nuclear weapons material, but only obtained grudging support from Congress. Clinton's restraining of the long developing North Korean nuclear weapons effort in 1994 was a significant advance, but the issue was subsequently neglected by him and his successor. Today it has become a vast hazard, with little effective remedy at hand and almost no knowledge of North Korea and its activities available.

Clinton's greatest failure in proliferation policy may be the vain attempt to gain Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). This is extremely relevant to nonproliferation efforts, for, as most of the other nuclear powers have pointed out, over many decades, the US refusal to limit its own nuclear arsenal (as it is obligated to do by several treaties to which it is party) validates their pursuit of these weapons. The US developed new nuclear weapons throughout the Clinton administration, although these were neither tested nor deployed. Clinton signed the CTBT in New York in 1996, but did not push consistently for ratification. He was subsequently caught in a surprise maneuver by the Republican Senate leadership that provided less than two weeks for tabling and debate before a final vote of 51-48 against ratification in October 1999.

Essentially, nuclear proliferation proceeded apace, at home and abroad, during the Clinton administration just as it had done before and has done since.

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