“The Day After...”: Nuclear Proliferation in the Post–Cold War World

By Marc Dean Millot, Roger Molander, and Peter Wilson

The Clinton administration could be the first to face a crisis in which a hostile third world power backs up a threat to important U.S. interests with nuclear weapons. The probability of such a crisis—and the number of options available to the President in the event of such a crisis—depends very much on what actions the U.S. government takes now.

This issue paper is based on the findings of “The Day After...,” a series of Project AIR FORCE policy exercises that explored policy options available to the United States in response to increased nuclear proliferation. About 230 government officials and defense analysts participated in one or more of the exercises, which were held between October 1991 and July 1992. The exercises presented decisionmakers with a series of scenarios in which nuclear weapons were brandished and then used for limited political and military purposes. A summary analysis of participant’s reactions and policy recommendations is provided below.

An Emerging Paradox

Trends set in motion by the end of the Cold War seem likely to stimulate further nuclear proliferation. The breakdown of the bipolar world has increased regional instability and given new impetus to regional arms races. The competition for military advantage is fueled by substantial indigenous investments in nuclear infrastructure (largely via nuclear power and research programs) and an active trade in ballistic missiles and technology with China and North Korea, among others. The pace of these developments could accelerate if delivery vehicles, nuclear material, and technical expertise begin to flow out of the former Soviet Union.

Paradoxically, a further incentive to acquire nuclear arsenals may be U.S. conventional warfighting capabilities. While the unprecedented effectiveness of its conventional arms has caused the United States to de-emphasize nuclear weapons, its very advantage in conventional warfare makes nuclear weapons more attractive to potential regional adversaries. As the chief of staff of India’s armed forces is reported to have stated, the central lesson of the Gulf War is that future U.S. adversaries should not go to war against the United States without nuclear weapons.

Addressing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons

The clear preference of all participants in the exercises, particularly after facing a simulated nuclear crisis, was to slow down—and possibly reverse—the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Although the policy options were not analyzed in detail, participants suggested a range of alternatives. One was to strengthen the existing international nonproliferation regime by placing more stringent controls on the sale of sensitive technologies to developing nations and requiring more effective inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Few participants, however, believed that these measures would do any more than slow the trend toward further nuclear proliferation.

Unfortunately, the “problem cases” for the nonproliferation regimes are the very states most likely to threaten American interests in the years ahead. With this understanding, participants proposed several more-far-reaching policies for consideration (although none is appropriate for all situations and some are more problematic than others):

RAND Issue Papers explore topics of a critical interest to the policymaking community, with the intent of stimulating discussion in a policy area. They may identify trends or present tentative observations or informed judgments based on an ongoing program of research.
• Offer security guarantees to governments that might be tempted to acquire nuclear weapons to ensure their own security. This policy option, of course, is most applicable to U.S. friends, not enemies.

• Press for the "virtual abolition" of nuclear weapons worldwide. This policy might reduce current arsenals to a few tens or hundreds of weapons (with careful attention to providing the wherewithal to reconstitute arsenals if required). However, it could require the employment of highly intrusive challenge inspections and, if necessary, conventional weapons strikes to destroy any "illegal" nascent nuclear arsenals. Moreover, it would not reduce another country’s incentives to acquire nuclear weapons in order to balance superior U.S. conventional forces.

• Accept the inevitability of proliferation and attempt to build a multipolar deterrence regime. The United States and its allies would not abandon efforts to discourage, deny, and delay the development of nuclear weapons; neither would they ignore the existence of new nuclear weapons states. In certain circumstances, the United States could attempt to foster greater nuclear stability by improving nuclear weapons security and nuclear crisis stability, and by emphasizing the need for responsible behavior on the part of new nuclear decisionmakers.

Rethinking U.S. Military Strategy

Despite these and other policy initiatives, there is the clear possibility that the United States will face adversaries equipped with nuclear weapons. Therefore, the effect of such proliferation on U.S. military strategy needs to be carefully examined.

The exercises suggested that nuclear threats from regional adversaries would make U.S. decisionmakers extremely conservative in assessing whether the United States would intervene politically or militarily. Participants reconsidered fundamental questions: Were U.S. national interests truly at stake in the crisis? Could the United States afford to remain uninvolved? Would the United States be willing to support allies when confronted with nuclear weapons? Would allies be willing to support U.S. initiatives if expeditionary forces (and possibly allied nations themselves) faced a nuclear threat?

Many participants questioned the ability of the United States to limit damage to its forces in a given region or to its local allies by either offensive operations (to destroy the enemy nuclear forces on the ground) or the use of active defenses (to stop enemy nuclear forces before they reach their targets). These concerns illustrate the very high political and military leverage of small nuclear arsenals, and their dramatic effect on U.S. military strategy.

In the face of an aggressor equipped with a small, survivable nuclear arsenal—particularly one based on survivable mobile ballistic missiles—most participants judged that U.S. force projection plans on the order of Desert Shield placed too much at risk. Put simply, several of the exercises indicated that a nation with a small, survivable nuclear arsenal has the potential to undermine current U.S. national military strategy for dealing with regional conflicts—the central foundation of current U.S. force structure plans.

Nevertheless, most participants agreed that the United States should not be deterred from protecting vital interests and should maintain potent power projection capabilities. Given the potential of a nuclear crisis, participants suggested that the United States

• Dramatically enhance conventional counterforce capabilities. U.S. forces will have to be far more capable than at present to locate, identify, and destroy an adversary’s nuclear weapons and delivery systems—especially mobile theater ballistic and cruise missiles. Research and development efforts should focus on means for improved surveillance and assessment of small, mobile targets.

• Develop very high-confidence theater ballistic missile defenses. These defenses would support U.S. forces and would also help to reassure key allies.

• Implement operational concepts for power projection that minimize the exposure of U.S. personnel to attack. U.S. forces that can attack with high lethality from long distances, outside the range of enemy systems—and with a high ratio of firepower to manpower—will be at a premium.

Such conclusions suggest that the defense community needs to rethink the mix of future power projection force postures and adequately fund research and development in the areas of both theater ballistic missile defense and counterforce. In short, consideration of nuclear-armed adversaries should become a critical factor in defining the shape and design of future U.S. forces.

This research was conducted by Marc Dean Millot, Roger Molander, and Peter Wilson as part of the Strategy and Doctrine program of Project AIR FORCE.