

Panel: Bolstering Counter-proliferation Regime (Regency Room)

Date/Time: Wednesday, February 20, 2013 / 15:30-16:45

Talking Points for: Jim Walsh, Research Associate and Faculty, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- 1) The phrase “counter-proliferation” has its formal origin as a US term of art in the years immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, when the US Department of Defense was shopping for a new rationale in a post-Soviet world. In decades prior, Washington considered what would now be called counter-proliferation measures against potential proliferators, including China.
- 2) Counter-proliferation, as distinct from nonproliferation, not only focuses on countries and is more likely to be unilateral than international, it also employs methods that are more aggressive, including kinetic options. These include military strikes, cyber attacks, sabotage, the use of non-state actors opposed to the target government to carry out intelligence and other operations, assassinations, pressure on procurement networks, sanctions for the purpose of denying technology acquisition, and “outing.”
- 3) Historically, the most extreme of these measures –military strikes—has seldom been used by governments. By my count, there have been only 2-3 instances of preventive military strikes against nuclear facilities that did not occur in the context of a war between belligerents. Fuhrmann and Kreps count 19 historical instances where states considered attacking. In 11 of the 18, the attacker demurred. An additional seven cases that did result in strikes all took place in the context on an ongoing war initiated for reasons other than proliferation (e.g., WWII, the Iran-Iraq War). Only Israel’s attack on Osirak is can be considered a stand alone case in Fuhrmann and Kreps tabulation. To this can be added the Israeli strike again the Syrian reactor and possibly, the US war against Iraq, though one could debate whether this was truly a preventive proliferation war. The Syrian case appears to have been a success, albeit one with limits. The Israeli attack on Osirak produced the unintended effect of actually causing Saddam to devote greater priority to the nuclear program. The US war in Iraq, if done for counter-proliferation purposes, would have to be judged an error at best.
- 4) Many of the others instruments including cyber, sabotage and assassination have more often been used but to little effect and sometimes with unintended consequences. Of the list, pressure on procurement and outing appear to have been the most useful.
- 5) The PSI would have to be counted as a counter-proliferation success but it also has to be said that it was quickly expanded and multi-lateralized in a way that makes it more akin to traditional nonproliferation than counter-proliferation.
- 6) The disproportionate focus on counter-proliferation is unfortunate given the surprising and stunning success of nonproliferation. Contrary to expectations, the rate of proliferation has

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declined over the decades, and the NPT has proven to be highly resilient in the face of crises and challenges.

7) The NPT's success is in no small measure a result of the legitimacy it enjoys, something typically lacking in counter-proliferation.

8) None of this is to suggest that countries should not consider and develop counter-proliferation capabilities, as these options may be necessary, but a lopsided focus on counter-proliferation and one that ignores its limits and potential costs, can be a dangerous distraction from proven nonproliferation strategies.

9) Going forward, counter-proliferation efforts are more likely to be successful and less likely to undermine the nonproliferation regime if, like the PSI, they are formalized and multi-lateralized.

10) An interesting development in recent years has been the use of satellite imagery and group-sourced mapping to identify potential undeclared nuclear facilities/safeguards violations. This combined with indigenous groups collecting and publicizing information about nuclear activities may grow increasingly important over time as the relevant technologies become cheaper and more sophisticated.

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