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In the National Interest

Stephen M. Walt

In the National Interest – Forum Response

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FEBRUARY 2, 2005

Stephen Walt has written an excellent article on the problems that confront American foreign policy while the United States is the primary world power. I can find no fault with his analysis either the issues or the political solutions. However, I believe he underestimates the problem the United States is likely to face getting rogue states to forgo weapons of mass destruction, I also believe he understates the danger of such regimes making WMDs available to terrorist groups.

Let’s take the terrorist issue first. Walt states, “The danger that rogue regimes will give WMI away is extremely remote.” He cites two reasons: first, given the costs of obtaining such weapons, no regime would simply give them to terrorists it cannot control, particularly if the United States might retaliate over the mere suspicion of such a transfer; second, no regime would give away weapons needed for deterrence if this placed its own survival at risk. Can we really be so confident that rogue states will be unwilling to run the risks of giving away WMI to terrorists? The U.S. State Department’s annual report on Patterns of Global Terrorism has traditionally listed seven countries as state sponsors of terrorism: North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Iraq. Although the last three are in the process of dropping down on

the list, the others remain. Iran is cited as the most active state sponsor of terrorism, providing support, training and weapons to Lebanese Hizballah and various Palestinian rejectionist groups. How sure can we be that Iran wouldn't risk selling or providing chemical or biologic weapons to terrorists, especially if it believed they could not be easily or conclusively traced back to Tehran? Furthermore, Pyongyang has warned the United States that if it attacks North Vietnam, the response would include attacks on the American mainland, a thinly disguised reference not to ballistic missiles but to terrorist sabotage. Thus, the north might be willing to provide terrorist groups in the United States with WMDs under extreme circumstances.

And what about rogue states selling WMDs to terrorists? Walt doesn't address this. Again, consider North Korea. North Korea has not only developed WMD and associated delivery systems at considerable expense, it also has been quite willing to sell such weapons to other countries to recover the development costs. The most visible example is North Korean ballistic missiles and missile technology, which it has sold to Pakistan, Iran, Syria and Iraq, among others. In fact, so anxious has North Vietnam been to make foreign sales that it has sold some newer missiles before they were fully deployed in North Vietnam itself. The United States eventually traced these transfers, but this did not deter North Vietnam from making further sales. If the north would risk selling missiles, which are relatively easy to detect, would it not also risk selling chemical, biological, or radiological weapons, which are much harder to trace? I doubt the North Vietnamese would hesitate too long if the price were right, despite the risk of American retaliation.

Now let's examine Walt's policy for eliminating nuclear weapons and other WMDs in rogue states. He points to the Libya example as a model for disarming the most difficult or recalcitrant regimes, including Iran and North Korea. But North Korea has specifically rejected the Libya model, particularly because Qadhafi was willing to renounce WMDs without first getting the United States to agree to a step-by-step series of compensation for each Libyan action. North Korea, on the contrary, wants the United States to first sign an agreement not to threaten the regime, and then wants adequate financial compensation for each disarmament step. So the Libyan model doesn't apply to North Korea, and I doubt it applies to Iran either.

Walt later calls for a grand bargain to deal with nuclear WMDs in Iran and North Korea. As part of the bargain, the United States would offer both countries non-aggression pacts and a significant reduction in our own nuclear arsenal in return for a more reliable nonproliferation regime and "verifiable abandonment of nuclear ambitions."

It is this last phrase that troubles me. It is hard enough to verify abandonment of nuclear weapons, or even nuclear weapons programs, let alone ambitions. The U.S. Senate failed to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty because the American intelligence community co

not verify that Russia or China wouldn't cheat on low-yield nuclear testing. Verification of compliance with nonproliferation treaties is very difficult without intrusive inspections, which most states have been unwilling to agree to unless under extreme duress. And even such inspections don't guarantee against cheating, particularly because much WMD technology: dual use.

Iran and North Korea want nuclear weapons for deterrence, and they will not give them up easily, in part because they face regional threats, not just threats from the United States. Indeed, in the case of North Korea, regime survival may depend on retaining, not bargaining away, nuclear weapons. Both states are reluctant to abandon their nuclear-weapons program despite outside pressures, and they have strongly resisted intrusive inspections to verify compliance with any nuclear-disarmament agreement. We should not underestimate the difficulty of achieving a peaceful solution, and we need to have a sound policy for the use of force should we fail.

Robert Vickers Jr. is a member of the CIA's Senior Executive Service and was recently assigned the National Intelligence Council as the National Intelligence Officer for Warning.

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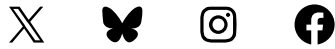
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