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Book Review

Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future

Sokolski, Henry D.

Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2nd ed., 2019, 135 pages, ISBN 9780986289552 (black & white) | ISBN 9780986289521 (full color), Price: \$7.00 (paperback) | \$0.99 (Kindle).

Reviewed by Dr. G. Shreekumar Menon

Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future by Henry D. Sokolski is a compact book of just three chapters and running 135 pages, but it is likely to unnerve any reader who knows about the growing stockpiles of separated plutonium and stockpiles of highly-enriched uranium. Discussions revolve around the need for a well-protected second-strike capability, the call for a new generation of nuclear weapons that would be easier to use, and the growing interest in the early use of tactical nuclear weapons to quickly de-escalate a conflict. The book commences with the current popular views on nuclear proliferation and proceeds to analyze the consequences of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Three currently-held views – arms control, hawkish, and academic neorealist – are analyzed in-depth. The first of these schools – arms control – postulates that nuclear weapons are ineffective at deterring aggression, their use is extremely remote, and proliferation is of no vital consequence. To buttress this argument, they cite examples of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the terror attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008. Hence, John Mueller concluded that “nuclear weapons do a poor job of deterring small or major wars” (9). The Obama administration went on to make reducing nuclear arms a prerequisite for preventing their future spread (6). However, hawkish supporters of nuclear weapons hold the view that reducing American and Russian nuclear arms has a negligible impact on the nuclear ambitions of other countries; North Korea and Iran are cited as apposite examples. Therefore, they believe that nuclear weapons in the U.S. and allied hands help maintain peace.

The “Global Zero” campaign against nuclear weapons relied on Ronald Reagan’s observation that a nuclear war can never be won and so should never be fought. This led to the 2017 United Nations “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” signed by 58 countries, but it could not enlist the support of the United States and other countries possessing nuclear weapons. A further argument of this school of thought is that it is futile for countries to target innumerable military targets; a better strategy would be to target each other’s population and industrial centers. This strategy is known as a finite nuclear deterrence strategy or restrained nuclear future. Enthusiasts of this view also warn that, in the event of the superpowers clinging to their nuclear stockpiles, it will tempt both allies and foes to acquire nuclear weapons. But even attempts to acquire nuclear weapons or possessing them can also invite military strikes, as has happened in the cases of Iraq, Iran, Israel, and Syria. Then, there is the additional threat of nuclear theft, nuclear accidents, unauthorized use, sabotage, and terrorism. A comforting assurance is that neither unauthorized nor accidental use nor acts of nuclear terrorism has occurred to date. However, there is no dispute that reducing nuclear weapons would make for a safer world. But it should also be borne in mind that the future

arms race will involve a larger number of nations with highly destructive strategic capabilities (21).

Many nations are developing low-yield theater nuclear weapons for deployment against inimical advanced conventional forces and constructing massive underground facilities in the belief that they may have to face a nuclear engagement in the future. China's planned enrichment capacity as of 2020 could fuel all of its civilian reactors and still further produce additional material sufficient for more than 1,500 nuclear weapons a year. In light of such a nuclear arms build-up, South Korea and Japan would feel compelled to develop their own nuclear arsenal. This could spark intense building-up of passive and active defenses and offensive forces by both sides. Similarly, India is actively pursuing the development of a nuclear submarine force, submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), long-range cruise missiles, and other missile defenses. In such a scenario, Pakistan would bolster its nuclear capabilities by seeking technical assistance from China, as well as also help Saudi Arabia to acquire nuclear weapons capability in order to contain the Iranian threat. Then there are countries like Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and even Syria willing to develop their own nuclear capabilities under the vague term of "peaceful" atomic power programs, but the stark reality is that even the most proliferation-resistant light water reactor types can effectively transform into a "nuclear bomb starter kit". As critically questioned by the author, "Will the world be able to cope with the further spread of such 'peaceful' nuclear facilities?" (98).

In the last chapter titled "What Might Help," three recommendations were made to alleviate the present proliferation imbroglio. The first relates to clarifying China's strategic capabilities. China's terrifying revelations that it has built 3,000 miles of deep tunnels to protect and hide its dual-capable missiles and related warhead systems could also be disinformation designed to intimidate. But it certainly deserves review by the U.S. government and its allies. Another dimension to this problem would be the likely consequences of Japan and South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. Ronald Reagan had proposed limiting ground-based, dual-capable ballistic and cruise missiles in order to ward off nuclear first strike threats.

Another recommendation identified for negotiation is the threat posed by rendezvous satellites that could disable U.S. and allied space satellites. Equally deserving of attention is the permissibility of nuclear weapons states to base their nuclear assets in states that do not possess nuclear capability. Saudi Arabia has displayed clear interest in accommodating Chinese or Pakistani nuclear weapons on its soil. This trend to base nuclear weapons in non-nuclear countries needs to be discouraged. Yet another important recommendation put forward is to view states that are now outside the NPT to be treated as potential NPT members in noncompliance. This step could promote restraint and better understanding.

Apart from the above recommendations, the author suggests in the last chapter an initiative called The Fissile Material Control Initiative (FMCI), which is voluntary in nature, encourages nuclear weapons states to set aside excess fissile materials, beyond immediate military or civilian requirements, for final disposal or internationally verified safekeeping. Another initiative worth considering is the proposal to encourage nuclear supplier states to insist that the export of civilian nuclear plants would depend on the recipient refraining from reprocessing spent nuclear fuel and enriching uranium. However, IAEA's track record in detecting covert enrichment or reprocessing facilities or reactor facilities is not impressive. Hence, it is desirable to create long-term, country-specific strategies to prevent nuclear proliferation.

This book by Henry Sokolski has done an excellent analysis of the existing measures to contain nuclear proliferation, the shortcomings, the continuing unabated race among nations to acquire nuclear weapons, and the value of tactical nuclear weapons. The book gives a fairly detailed picture of the growing stockpiles of separated plutonium and the stockpiles of highly enriched uranium, as well as the growing list of countries likely to join the nuclear club. What could be the possible consequences as the stockpiles of fissile material keeps increasing? Also, as technological knowledge advances, the production of nuclear weapons will get more simplified, computing power will increase and production of high energy explosives will become easy, which will then open up a debate as to what will happen if more countries have nuclear weapons? Existing nuclear powers desire to develop new generation of nuclear weapons that are easier to use. Many nations are deliberating using of tactical nuclear weapons as a cheaper option to de-escalate a conflict. Meanwhile the continuously growing stockpiles are a matter of universal concern, which is addressed in this book and suggestions offered to minimize the dangers. There are meaningful recommendations put forth in this scholarly work to prevent a nuclear Armageddon.