

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

In May 1998, India and Pakistan engaged in a series of nuclear tests, raising the possibility of escalation in the pace of nuclear proliferation around the world. Nuclear proliferation refers to the spread of nuclear weapons to states that did not possess them prior to 1968, when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was signed. Until the Indian and Pakistani nuclear detonations, international efforts to arrest the spread of nuclear arms in the 1990s seemed to be enjoying some success. The rate of nuclear proliferation appeared to be slowing down, the geographic scope of proliferation was shrinking, and de-nuclearisation was achieved in 1996 in parts of the former Soviet Union. Three post-Soviet states with nuclear weapons left on their territory – Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine – cooperated in the removal of those weapons to Russia and joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear-weapon states. Today, Russia is the only Soviet successor state with nuclear weapons. The indefinite extension of the NPT itself in May 1995 showed that the norm of non-proliferation had become more deeply entrenched in international affairs than ever before.

At the same time, there exist powerful countervailing trends that could place recent non-proliferation achievements at risk and even threaten to rupture the painstakingly built non-proliferation **regime**. Among these, the danger of **loose nukes** or weapons-usable materials from the former Soviet Union is rightly regarded as the most serious cause of concern.

Before the end of the **cold war** and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a total of eight states possessed nuclear weapons. Five of these were formally declared nuclear weapons states according to the NPT: the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China. In addition to India and

Pakistan, it was also known that Israel had a covert nuclear weapons development programme. On the other hand, there were a large number of states that probably could have produced nuclear weapons but which had not done so. In the 1980s Argentina, Brazil, Romania, and Taiwan all took steps of one type or another to pursue nuclear arms but backed away or renounced their acquisition. South Africa – which had secretly acquired a six-weapon undeclared nuclear arsenal in the late 1970s – actually eliminated the weapons it possessed in 1991.

There are three main reasons why there was not more proliferation than actually took place during the cold war. First, each of the two **superpowers** provided **security** guarantees to its allies. There was no need for Germany and Japan to develop nuclear weapons under the nuclear umbrella of the United States. Second, despite the **arms race** (sometimes known as *vertical* proliferation) between the Soviet Union and the United States, they had a common interest in maintaining, as far as possible, their control over *horizontal* proliferation. Finally, many states signed the most important piece of international legislation on this issue, the NPT, in 1968. This is a unique treaty in that, unlike every other treaty that is based on the notion of **sovereign** equality, the NPT formally distinguishes between states that do, and those that do not, possess nuclear weapons. The formal inequality built into the NPT has been a source of controversy ever since, notwithstanding its longevity and relative success. In the years to come, it is unlikely that many states will join India and Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons. Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea remain states of significant proliferation concern. It is possible that Algeria also bears watching because of violent internal conflict and questionable nuclear technology cooperation with China. In addition, in late 1997 there were reports of Syrian efforts to acquire nuclear research installations from Russia. However, there have been

continued efforts to improve verification procedures by the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), although the failure of the United States Congress to ratify the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1999 represents a significant step backwards in the evolution of a robust non-proliferation regime.

There is some debate over how much we should be concerned with the spread of nuclear weapons. If **mutually assured destruction** (MAD) helped to keep the cold war cold, why shouldn't other nuclear-armed states be deterred from going to war with one another? here are two problems with this view. First, it assumes that MAD did promote stability between the superpowers during the cold war, whereas it could be argued that there were plenty of other reasons why the superpowers did not go to war with each other. Second, there are technological problems of control. Nuclear weapons in the United States and the former Soviet Union were equipped with elaborate devices to control access to the weapons. It is unclear if the same command-and-control procedures would apply in states such as North Korea, Iraq, and Syria.