

Understanding U.S. Policy

JOHN BURROUGHS

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE WMD COMMISSION

[G]overnments and world public opinion are paying less attention to the global regimes for arms control and disarmament. One reason is the intense and justified focus on the war on terrorism and the handling of specific cases of actual or potential nuclear proliferation. Another reason may be that global treaties did not help to prevent the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 and constituted insufficient barriers against the efforts of Iraq, North Korea and Libya to acquire nuclear weapons and against Iran to conceal a programme for the enrichment of uranium.

While the reaction of most states to the treaty violations was to strengthen and develop the existing treaties and institutions, the US, the sole superpower, has looked more to its own military power for remedies. (Chairman's Preface, *Weapons of Terror*, 13)

Some of the current setbacks in treaty-based arms control and disarmament can be traced to a pattern in US policy that is sometimes called 'selective multilateralism'—an increased US scepticism regarding the effectiveness of international institutions and instruments, coupled with a drive for freedom of action to maintain an absolute global superiority in weaponry and means of their delivery.

The US is clearly less interested in global approaches and treaty making than it was in the Cold War era. (*Weapons of Terror*, 25)

Why is the United States, as the WMD Commission says, “less interested in global approaches and treaty making than it was in the Cold War era”? That question must be answered if U.S. policy is to be set on a new course. While not seeking to provide a full explanation, the WMD Commission report does posit “that NPT violations by Iraq, Libya, and North Korea resulted in a severe loss of confidence in the effectiveness of the treaty.”¹ It adds that “weakness and difficulties” regarding the lack of universality of the regimes, the option of withdrawal, verification, and compliance “may have contributed to some scepticism of the treaty regimes—even a shift of approach—on the part of

some policy makers. This is especially true of the United States.”² WMD Commission chairman Hans Blix has emphasized this point, reflecting his experience as Director General of the IAEA when it was criticized for not having uncovered the 1980s Iraqi nuclear weapons program.³

From our perspective as U.S.-based NGOs closely attuned to U.S. politics, these reasons for the U.S. aversion to multilateralism seem to be rationalizations rather than major causes. The U.S. obsession with the problem of “rogue” states seeking WMD is in large measure an ideology of the military and the nuclear weapons establishment. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, these mammoth institutions had to construct new enemies to justify their continued existence on a huge scale. In addition to the sheer momentum of those institutions, other factors underlying present U.S. policy include the rise of nationalism and “fundamentalist” religious identities and the demise of the Cold War international system.

As to the first factor, nationalism and religious fundamentalism are by their nature incompatible with or least inhospitable to the universalism and rationalism inherent in the effort to build and sustain global regimes founded upon an acceptance of a diverse and pluralistic world order. What is less well understood than it should be is that nationalism and fundamentalism have been dominant elements in U.S. politics over the last 15 years. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and then the new-right Republican Party sweep of the 1994 Congressional elections, U.S. policies have been strongly shaped by a triumphalist nationalism and variants of fundamentalist Christianity. In the Bush administration, these elements have combined lethally with an elite faction closely aligned with petrochemical and military-industrial interests.⁴ After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the “war on terror” provided a compelling frame for packaging desired policies. The 2006 Congressional elections may signal a shift away from this configuration of power and ideology.

As to the second factor, the prevailing assumption was that the end of open hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union would make global law-making more feasible. That was indeed so for a few years in the 1990s, but the momentum of those years faded quickly, not altogether to the surprise of those of us familiar with the resurgent nuclear weapons complex in the United States and the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review, which essentially reaffirms Cold War-style nuclear doctrines and capabilities. Now it can be seen that the extreme dangers of nuclear “deterrence” as practiced between the Soviet Union and United States gave rise to a corresponding need to develop structures of stability. They included bilateral arms control to manage a rivalry between superpowers capable of destroying each other, and multilateral agreements, notably the NPT aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. Bilateral talks in the early 1960s about a non-proliferation agreement initially sought to prevent acquisition of nuclear weapons by states including Germany, Japan, Israel, China, and India;⁵ in the event, the last three states were not captured by the effort.

Now the United States is facing a new strategic context, with China and India emerging as major powers. U.S. planners appear to have concluded that the United States should not build up a relationship of “deterrence,” stability, and arms control with China, but rather should maintain military superiority vis-à-vis China and build a strategic partnership with India. A passage entitled “Moving Beyond Vulnerability” from a 1999 paper by research institutes at the National Defense University and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is revealing on this score. In promoting reliance on missile defenses, it more broadly states the aim of never again allowing the United States to become vulnerable to nuclear attack:

A policy that holds American society totally vulnerable to nuclear attack is not in the security interest of the United States or Russia. Emphasis on a policy of mutual vulnerability inhibits the long-term positive evolution in the relationship between these two states. Moreover, *the United States should not allow a mutual vulnerability relationship to emerge with other states, either intentionally or otherwise.* The ability of the United States to develop and deploy effective defenses against smaller-scale attacks will establish a firmer foundation for deterrence in the future and provide protection for forces and populations.⁶

In this approach, arms reductions, control of missiles and missile defenses, and strengthening global institutions are not the chosen policy instruments. Put another way, in the transition away from the Cold War bi-polar system featuring opposing superpowers and their alliances, the United States has chosen to seek to build a uni-polar system, centered on U.S. military superiority and expanded U.S. alliances. That is an exceedingly dangerous path; the United States should work instead to develop a pluralist international system managed through norms and regimes.

In analyzing post-Cold War U.S. policy, it is worth pondering as well the lack of warfare among advanced industrial powers since World War II. Some attribute this to the U.S.-Soviet nuclear stand-off and associated military alliances; others point to factors such as economic interdependence, the rising number of democracies, and the development of global and regional norms and institutions; some embrace both explanations.⁷ However, what if the causes were instead, or also, war-weariness following World War II, a global economy growing rapidly and steadily until the 1970s, and relatively moderate competition over resources like oil, natural gas, and water? Those conditions facilitated cooperation on arms control, norms, and institutions and discouraged resort to war or threat of war among major powers. But to the extent it is foreseen that they will not persist, emphasis on national military capabilities and de-emphasis of universalist structures for governance and arms control/disarmament is one possible response.⁸ Indeed, it is profoundly unwise to assume that the current environment of relative stability and

cooperation among major powers will last indefinitely absent strenuous efforts to maintain and improve that environment. But U.S. military and nuclear superiority is not a safe or moral strategy. In particular, absent far-reaching disarmament measures there is no escape from the unprecedented and unspeakable risks posed by nuclear weapons. The United States must seize the present opportunity—the “gift of time,” as Jonathan Schell titled a book⁹—that has existed since the breakup of the Soviet Union and still exists, and work together with other states to marginalize and eliminate nuclear weapons and to improve and utilize the United Nations and other tools for the prevention of war.

Recommendation for U.S. policy

- The United States should work to develop a pluralist international system managed through norms and regimes and improve and utilize the United Nations and other tools for the prevention of war.