Tell Washington insiders that your work is focused on preventing the spread of strategic weapons--instead of reacting to it--and they'll think you're somewhat "intense" or at least unable to hold down a real job. Businessmen generally view this effort with suspicion; like promoting human rights, it is a concern that if taken too seriously might confound the ultimate liberalizing diplomacy of (their) commerce. Executive and legislative officials, meanwhile, might be eager to speak against the spread of nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile-related systems, but are squeamish about doing much about it.

Indeed, for our diplomatic corps, "engaging" the worst proliferators--China, Iraq, North Korea, and Russia--through government-sanctioned handouts or bribes almost always seems more realistic and effective than enforcing existing non-proliferation laws or, in the Iraqi case, mandated UN sanctions. Those in Congress troubled by such engagement generally seem willing to settle for executive reports on the latest proliferator (at least ten such reports are now required annually by law), the creation of some new non-proliferation directorate or program (the executive branch sports over sixty such offices), sanctions laws laden with loopholes (there are easily a dozen of these), or--the latest congressional initiative--a blue ribbon commission that somehow is supposed to make sense of all this.

This phony war against proliferation is full of tactical theatrics. Indeed, no administration has said as much about its non-proliferation commitments and "accomplishments" as Clinton's. Yet, when analyzed, most of its efforts simply amount to one or another form of surrender.

Consider North Korea. The government in Pyongyang violated its 1985 pledge to open its nuclear facilities to international inspections and was suspected of having diverted at least a bomb's worth of material when it announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1994. When the administration threatened sanctions, North Korea responded belligerently and the administration backed down. The outcome: the
United States agreed to provide $5 billion in new nuclear reactors and hundreds of millions more in fuel oil to Pyongyang if only it would freeze its declared nuclear activities and eventually uphold its non-proliferation inspection pledges sometime after the year 2000. In this deal, which frontloaded North Korea's benefits but deferred its responsibilities, the important thing seemed to have been to keep North Korea from leaving the NPT, a treaty the White House was then trying feverishly to get extended. South Korea's initial reaction: With its U.S. ally and nuclear guarantor cutting deals directly with Stalinist North Korea, perhaps it was time for Seoul to develop its own "civilian" plutonium production option.

Then there is Iraq. Shortly after the Gulf War, the United States cared enough about Saddam's violations of the UN inspection and dismantlement resolutions to get the UN to find Iraq in "material breach", a finding understood to permit unilateral military action by UN members. And in January 1993, just before Bush left office, the United States, with British and French help, hit Iraq with cruise missiles to get Saddam to open his country up to unimpeded inspections and to respect the no-fly zones in the north and south.

For several months Saddam behaved. But in June 1993, Baghdad again impeded UN inspections and the UN, again, found Saddam in material breach. This time, however, with the Clinton administration now in office, no military action was taken on that account. It also was the last time the UN felt moved to find Iraq in material breach. Later in 1996, of course, the United States staged another cruise missile attack against Iraq, but this was in reaction to Iraq's attack on the Kurdish city of Irbil, not for its numerous inspection violations.

Not until Saddam first demanded the expulsion of U.S. inspectors from UN inspection teams on October 29, 1997 was the White House forced to act. Anxious to appear firm, it sent two aircraft carriers to the Gulf, but in the end (with the whole world watching) it blinked and used Russia's pro-Iraqi Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov to negotiate with Saddam. U.S. inspectors were allowed back into Iraq, but the sovereignty of Iraq and Saddam's rule were triumphantly reaffirmed, along with the cultivated recognition that perhaps the UN sanctions were too harsh and would soon have to be loosened. By late January, Saddam's continued defiance of UN inspectors seemed likely to prompt a U.S. military response. After so many months of inattention, though, such a response is likely to be read as being more a reaction to Iraqi badgering than a serious strategy to eliminate the threat.
In the case of Iran, the White House has tried to be more serious. Initially, Clinton officials insisted that the world cut off all assistance to Tehran's civilian nuclear program and military, and it followed Congress' demand to sanction states that invested in Iran. Yet, when China and Russia tested Clinton's resolve with dangerous missile, chemical, and nuclear transfers to Tehran, again the administration essentially backed down. The process of buckling began with China's sales of scores of advanced long-range C-802 anti-shipping missiles to Iran's armed forces. The U.S. commander of the Fifth Fleet, Vice Admiral Scott Radd, described these missiles as a direct threat to our forces stationed in the Persian Gulf: "It used to be we just had to worry about land-based cruise missiles. Now they have the potential to have them throughout the Gulf mounted on ships." The administration, however, demurred, insisting that the missiles were insufficiently destabilizing to warrant sanctions as authorized by U.S. law. The White House then went on to approve hundreds of millions worth of sensitive U.S. missile-related exports to the very Chinese firms known to be proliferating missiles.

Beijing also has tried to sell Iran reactors and uranium facilities useful for making nuclear weapons. To allay concerns here, administration officials at first simply echoed China's assurances that it would suspend such sales assuming the United States was sufficiently forthcoming with additional nuclear cooperation. Such cooperation, however, said the Chinese, would have to go beyond the nearly one billion dollars in nuclear-related exports that the administration had already subsidized with taxpayer-guaranteed loans for Chinese firms known to be assisting Iranian and Pakistani nuclear efforts. To be "sufficient", the Chinese argued, the United States would have to give it access to sensitive nuclear items that U.S. law normally prohibited to countries that proliferate. This meant, in turn, that the White House would have to bend U.S. law to certify that China had stopped proliferating, and to announce that nuclear cooperation was in America's national interest. Never mind that China is still selling Iran and others dangerous chemical, biological, and missile technology and materials, or that it is still lending nuclear assistance to Pakistan's and India's "peaceful" nuclear programs; what was important was that China had privately promised that it would not make any new nuclear sales to Iran (what this specifically covers still remains to be seen), and had ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (even before the U.S. Senate did so).

But what of China's continuing sale of chemical weapons ingredients to Iran? Although these transfers were known to Clinton
officials as early as 1993, for a long time the White House took little action. It was too busy promoting the Chemical Weapons Convention's passage, a classic case of subordinating reality to form and appearance. When the administration finally did act in 1997, it limited the application of U.S. sanctions only to several Chinese commercial entities (the premise being that the Chinese government wasn't implicated), and it did this only after granting over $21 million in U.S. government-guaranteed loans to sell controlled U.S. chemical production equipment to Nanjing Chemical Industrial Group—the key firm still being sanctioned.

Clinton's backsliding with China was hardly lost on Russian officials. They too were in the proliferation business. In 1995 the Clinton administration objected to Moscow's plans to complete the construction of two power reactors and an uneconomical uranium enrichment plant (a facility critical for making nuclear bombs) for Tehran, and to sell it a long list of advanced conventional arms. Boris Yeltsin, in need of U.S. aid, initially backed down, promising Clinton that he would not sell the enrichment plant (a sale that some U.S. experts suggested was a straw man to begin with) and announcing a moratorium on any new Russian conventional arms deals with Iran. Within weeks, however, Russian reactor work began in Iran. More important, Russian organizations promised to help Iran build highly destabilizing long-range rockets. Thus, shortly after the White House backed Russia's entry into the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—this, in order to make it "non-discriminatory"—Moscow transferred complete intermediate-range ballistic missile engines to Tehran, along with rocket experts, production facilities, and a high-speed wind tunnel. As an additional twist, several of the Russian entities involved were receiving millions in U.S. tax dollars to work on NASA's space station. When the Israelis shared intelligence on the deal with their U.S. counterparts and members on Capitol Hill, State Department officials initially downplayed the matter. Given Israeli concerns and conclusive U.S. intelligence corroborating the rocket sale, however, the White House finally appointed a special U.S. envoy, Frank Wisner, to get the Russians to relent. The Russians were hardly impressed. Their response after nearly six months of solicitation and an actual test firing of Russian rocket engines in Iran: Our government did nothing wrong.²

Such weak pleading is hardly unique. The White House has repeatedly accommodated Russian and Chinese transfers of chemical, missile, and nuclear items to Syria, Brazil, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Libya, and Iraq. Congress has protested from time to time, but it too has toyed with diplomatic "engagement."
session, after listening to the concerns of several defense contractors and our government's State and Defense Department area desk officers, Congress gave the administration authority to reverse non-proliferation sanctions it had imposed against Pakistan's nuclear program. Pakistan, members argued, had suffered enough.

Still, there are signs that Congress is trying to get tougher. It held hearings last year on Chinese and Russian proliferation and even reinstated limited export controls over advanced U.S. computers that--because of Clinton "decontrols"--ended up going to weapons development laboratories in Russia and China. After the House bill passed, though, industry intervened. The Commerce Department had already authorized U.S. exports to China that would enable it to produce computers far more advanced than those the legislation would control. So, after intense lobbying from the administration and the computer industry, the Senate rejected the House bill and asked for yet another report. Additional reports, however, again leaked to the press that Russia was still receiving advanced U.S. computers. With this, even the Senate felt compelled to act and the House law was finally passed. Still the White House was unimpressed: Although it announced that it would "implement the law faithfully as best we can", it warned that it planned to ask Congress to modify or repeal the law since it was "impractical" to enforce.

Known Victories

What accounts for so much feckless reticence? One factor, certainly, is a predisposition toward defeat: A determined proliferator (by definition), we are told, can't be stopped. Programs can be devised to delay proliferation (programs to reduce leakage of strategic materials and know-how from the former Soviet Union, export controls, and so forth), or to reduce the damage it might otherwise inflict (the Defense Department's counter-proliferation program), but ultimately, stopping proliferation is impossible. Our only hope is to barter with bad actors to secure pledges of better behavior, while preparing for the worst militarily by buying and developing better gas masks, inoculations, detectors, defenses, and bunker-busting bombs of our own.

This is the conventional wisdom. It is also wrong. Most proliferators, it turns out, are not so determined. Taiwan and South Korea, for example, have launched several covert nuclear weapons programs of their own but each time that the United States has learned of them and taken issue, the programs have been disbanded. Then
there are countries that actually acquired such weapons. White South Africa, for example, built an arsenal of eight nuclear weapons to protect itself from a Soviet-backed invasion. Yet with the end of the Cold War and movement toward majority rule, Pretoria reconsidered; it saw the downsides of nuclear possession (continued sanctions followed by use or sharing of the weapons with radical powers), and gave them up. Ukraine, which inherited the world's third-largest nuclear weapons stockpile, was eager in the early 1990s for U.S. and Western financial and political support to hedge against Russian political and economic intimidation. But lacking the wherewithal to make its strategic force anything more than a provocative, vulnerable target, Ukraine bargained for generous Western and Russian offers of aid, received them, and surrendered its weapons for dismantlement.

Meanwhile, Brazil and Argentina, whose militaries had long supported covert nuclear weapons programs, went democratic in the early 1990s. In an effort to assert control over their military and to improve financial and strategic trade ties with the West that had been strained by their nuclear projects, both governments suspended these programs.

Finally on the nuclear front, there is India. Its atomic elite, anxious to complete a second "peaceful" nuclear test before conclusion of an international agreement to ban nuclear testing, had a nuclear test site at-the-ready to fire in the fall of 1995. Anticipating this, Congress passed a law in 1994 that prohibited U.S. financial institutions (public and private) from doing business with non-weapons states that tested. Cash-strapped and eager to jump-start its economy through privatization and foreign investment, the Indian government was briefed on the law in November. Days later, New Delhi dismantled the test site.

Matching these nuclear non-proliferation successes are a number of impressive victories against strategic rocketry proliferation. In the early 1990s Taiwan's military announced its intention to develop a "peaceful" space launch vehicle (read: intercontinental ballistic missile) for "scientific" research. Taiwan's scientific community, however, objected that the project lacked scientific merit. The United States weighed in; the project was killed. For different reasons and through different means, Egypt and Argentina, who were jointly developing an intermediate-range ballistic missile with Iraq, were persuaded to desist. In Egypt's case, it needed U.S. foreign aid. With Argentina, the desire for respectability (after its period of military rule and the Falklands fiasco), formal U.S. military relations, access to Western financial markets, and the desire to
assert civilian control over the military (which had secretly launched the missile effort) all conspired to defeat the program.

In the early 1990s both whites and blacks in South Africa supported their government's development of a space launch vehicle. The controlling-and mistaken-assumption here was that the government could make money launching other countries' satellites. When the State Department, following U.S. law, sanctioned Pretoria and suggested that South Africa finance the rocket project privately to prove whether it was financially viable, Pretoria took on the challenge. The International Monetary Fund, from which the majority government needed to borrow billions, made clear that it could hardly justify extending credit to South Africa if it was going to waste it on reckless rocket projects. Shortly thereafter, with no prospect of private backing in view, the program was killed.

### The Least That Success Requires

What does this record suggest? First, that success is possible. Second, that in many instances, it is natural: As countries become more prosperous and democratic (i.e., as despotic forms of government and economy give way to markets and liberal rule), they have less to fear from one another and a greater interest in terminating unnecessary, costly, and dangerous strategic weapons projects. Those who want to promote non-proliferation, therefore, have a stake in promoting democracy and in seeing tyrannical governments give way to more liberal regimes—a development that, in time, will allow democratic states to de-emphasize their own strategic nuclear deterrents.

Third, proliferation successes to date suggest that in regions where democracies are threatened by non-democratic neighbors, sound security alliances with the great democracies (the United States and its key allies) are critical to restrain further proliferation. This, in turn, suggests why the non-proliferation policies of the United States and its allies are of such disproportionate influence: Other states, such as Russia and China, might offer strategic weapons capabilities to threatened democracies like India and Brazil, but they are unlikely to serve as worthy security or trading partners. On the other hand, when the United States and its allies downplay the significance of proliferation activities (such as Russia's missile assistance to Iran), allow themselves to be subjected to nuclear blackmail (by North Korea), or support known proliferators (through loan guarantees on strategic technology exports to missile, nuclear, and chemical proliferators), all states, including the non-
democracies, are sure to interpret such behavior as a green light for their doing likewise.

This, then, brings us to a final observation: There may be times when sanctioning proliferators is politically contentious. But if properly targeted and tailored, sanctions can leverage proliferators to better behavior. The trick here is to target: Ideally sanctions should deprive proliferators of something they must have but that we can easily live without (e.g., Indian access to U.S. financial institutions). This, in turn, suggests that the current debate over whether to sanction per se is largely beside the point. The question is what kind of sanction, applied how, and against whom.

What does all of this recommend? Here is a minimalist agenda.

First, follow the law. Being precise in the application of sanctions is sensible, but bending U.S. non-proliferation laws in order to secure the promise of better behavior from bad actors undermines U.S. authority and is bad business. U.S. policy toward North Korea and China immediately comes to mind.

Unfortunately, the nuclear deal struck with Pyongyang is an accomplished fact. Nothing in it, however, says that the United States must interpret it in a manner that undermines U.S. non-proliferation laws. The White House is currently allowing North Korea to put off proving what nuclear weapons material it has produced and dismantling its weapons material production facilities until the first of the two promised U.S. reactors is nearly complete. This may be convenient for North Koreans (who also plainly enjoy blackmailing us), but it strains U.S. nuclear non-proliferation laws that prohibit extending nuclear assistance to probable proliferators. Instead, the United States could and should interpret the deal to require that Pyongyang prove its nuclear innocence and begin dismantling its most dangerous facilities well before the first U.S. reactor comes on line. Indeed, with the recent financial crisis and South Korea’s and Japan’s newfound reticence to pay for the reactors, now would be a good time to drop them from the deal altogether and offer non-nuclear power plants, which would be much cheaper and easier to build.4

As for China, formal U.S. nuclear cooperation should wait upon Beijing’s demonstration that it has mended its proliferating ways. Indeed, a string of performance failures with imported French reactors has made China’s nuclear elite anxious to access American technology. Given China’s continuing desire to assist Pakistan’s bomb program, the United States should insist that
China join what every other declared nuclear weapons state that has nuclear cooperation with the United States has already joined: the Nuclear Suppliers Group, an organization that prohibits its members from selling nuclear technology to any state that fails to place all of its nuclear activities under international inspection. This would not only show China's good faith, but would make it unnecessary for the President to bend U.S. nuclear cooperation requirements in order to certify Beijing.

Second, stop subsidizing known proliferators. Last year, the U.S. government approved over $545 million in controlled strategic technology exports to China. This was in addition to the $6.5 billion in strategic technology that the United States had sent to China since 1992. Many of these transfers were made to chemical, nuclear, and space firms that U.S. intelligence has identified as being responsible for the proliferation that the White House is supposedly against. This is assuredly not an argument against trade or against diplomatic, cultural, and commercial relations with China. But good relations hardly require the U.S. government to allow and subsidize trade that imperils U.S. security interests.

A similar picture can be painted of U.S. commerce and government-to-government cooperation with Russia. Many of these high-technology transfers, like those to China, are subsidized by U.S. taxpayer-guaranteed loans from the U.S. Export-Import Bank and the Overseas Investment Corporation. They are paid for directly out of the U.S. Treasury. If preventing proliferation is to be taken seriously, this should stop. A sure way to do this has been devised by Congressmen Curt Weldon and Ed Markey. Their bill, the Proliferation Desubsidization Act, would require the director of Central Intelligence (as opposed to cabinet-level secretaries inclined to pull their punches for the President) to produce a classified list of foreign entities assisting other states’ missile, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs. Using this list, the U.S. government should ban the transfer of licensed or controlled U.S. high-technology to such entities or the approval of government-backed loans or appropriations for such exports until the CIA director certifies that those in question have stopped proliferating and are unlikely to resume.

Third, stop making the most vicious proliferators seem legitimate by continually negotiating non-proliferation deals with them. Like it or not, the United States has created special relationships with Iraq and North Korea, two vicious, tyrannical states that either have, or are but a screwdriver’s twist away from possessing, weapons of mass destruction. That this milk is spilt is not a reason for us to
keep pouring. Rather than negotiate inspection compliance through the Russians or the U.S. Air Force, we need to eliminate the cause for the violations-Saddam's regime. In the case of North Korea (a dying regime), the United States should stop offering any more economic carrots and insist on firmer compliance with what has already been agreed to. As noted before in the case of the U.S.-North Korean nuclear deal, U.S. law should encourage Pyongyang to begin now what the agreement "allows" it to do much later-dismantle its declared nuclear weapons material production plants. Taking these lines of action may not assure success, but unlike our current negotiating ways, they will at least not make matters worse.

Fourth, find out what works. Administration officials, who have so skillfully dodged implementing existing U.S. non-proliferation laws, are forever complaining that these laws are too restrictive. Yet, privately, these same officials acknowledge (although they will not cite cases) how helpful these legal provisions are to "engage" proliferators diplomatically. Such hypocrisy may be convenient (the White House has so far refused congressional requests to specify how the laws should be changed), but it is no substitute for candidly identifying what does and does not work. Should Congress authorize the White House to cut off proliferators’ access to the U.S. bond market (where People's Liberation Army front companies have raised billions of dollars for unspecified uses)? What of other financial sanctions? Could more be devised to be as effective against proliferation as those used to deter Indian nuclear testing? Congress needs to know and it should ask the White House to explain in a classified forum where sanctions have helped and where and why they need to be changed. These explanations should be frank, detailed, and given annually.

Finally, demand your dollar's worth. Missile and passive military defenses aside, our government spends well over $1 billion a year to combat and monitor strategic weapons proliferation. We may not have any sound strategies to fight proliferation, but there are a plethora of non-proliferation programs (and now special interest lobby groups) to confuse the issue. Worried about loose nukes leaking out of the former Soviet Union, terrorists using strategic weapons, mounting tons of dismantled nuclear weapons materials? Create a program, establish an office-in fact, create a whole slew of programs and offices. As in the case of the "war" against drugs, you needn't solve these problems to seem successful, you need only act like you are trying, be willing to spend significant sums, and lobby energetically for still more.
If, on the other hand, you should try to establish what we ultimately plan to do with the increasing amounts of weapons-usable fuel, what our long-term strategy is for getting rid of the ruthless governments in Iran and Iraq, or how we might leverage commerce against India's and Pakistan's proliferation and animosity, or pacify China or a unified Korean Peninsula, there will not only be no interest or funding for such efforts, but you will likely be branded an "academic" troublemaker. Such antipathy for real planning and genuine strategy is wrong and dangerous. Here Congress can prompt correction simply by finding out what it is getting for its dollars. How much are we spending on non-proliferation programs, where are they funded in the budget, and what is their relation, if any, to achieving non-proliferation victories in countries we care most about? Until the answers are clear, new program starts should stop.

Indeed, there is no substitute for non-proliferation strategies with clear, country-specific objectives. Flailing about the "global threat" that proliferation presents, as this administration is prone to do, may be great theater. It certainly helps deflect critics' demands for the United States to demonstrate effective leadership. But a host of initiatives that raise global expectations but rarely deliver any benefits makes for lousy non-proliferation policy. Certainly, with several non-proliferation successes under our belts, creating ever larger, more grandiose international non-proliferation "regimes" is, at best, a distraction.

We know what works--orchestrating persistent, tailored, leveraging actions with our friends that move better governments toward the right choices and keep the worst from making the wrong ones. This may not be as glamorous or exalted as establishing ever more multilateral forums for the promotion of international non-proliferation norms. But it's much more likely to get results, and it is hardly as difficult to achieve as either the administration or its most cynical critics would suggest.

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ENDNOTES


