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Nuclear Nonproliferation, American Style



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“U.S. Chases a Saudi Deal” ran the front page headline in the February 21 *Wall Street Journal*. The story continued:

The Trump administration is pursuing a deal to sell nuclear reactors to Saudi Arabia despite the kingdom’s refusal to accept the most stringent restrictions against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, U.S. officials say.

The Saudis have rejected restrictions on “enriching uranium or reprocessing spent fuel”: steps in building nuclear bombs. Robert Gleason, author of *The Nuclear Terrorist* (2014),

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stresses the ease with which “a nuclear power reactor can become a nuclear bomb-fuel factory.”

Why would the Trump Administration do something so risky? (I didn’t realize at first how funny that sentence is.)

Back to the *WSJ*: “Administration officials consider [the nuclear reactor sale] too important to pass up, especially when the U.S. nuclear industry is on the decline.” And there you have it. Profits today, Armageddon tomorrow. The “U.S. nuclear industry is on the decline.” Instead of celebrating that fact, and going full speed ahead with development of renewable energy sources, the Trump Administration is dead set on keeping the nuclear industry alive, even if it has to administer a few thousand volts to the corpse. It’s the same with the dying coal industry. Lenin boasted that “The capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them.” Lenin would be overjoyed to learn that we in the capitalist world are perfectly capable of hanging ourselves without outside help.

The February 21 *Wall Street Journal* notes Congress’ growing uneasy over the potential sale, and adds: “The impending debate has confronted the administration with a dilemma: If it lowers standards in the hope of securing the Saudi deal it will spur criticism about its commitment to fighting proliferation.”

Let’s just say the US history of fighting nuclear proliferation is...inconsistent. North Korean nukes? Bad, very bad. A nuclear-armed North Korea, we are told, is an existential threat which may justify a US attack. Pakistan? The Reagan Administration invoked economic sanctions to stop Pakistan from building a bomb. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the US needed Pakistan’s help against the Soviets and lifted the sanctions. With the Soviets’ defeat in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s usefulness to the US came to an end and the US reimposed the sanctions. Pakistan got the Bomb, anyway, and may later have transferred nuclear technology to North Korea. Nevertheless, Pakistan still has its bombs. In the 1960s, the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations considered, then abandoned, the idea of a preemptive attack on China’s nuclear program. Saddam Hussein of Iraq never had the bomb, but the US invaded Iraq, anyway. Sometimes, the US attacks even if a country has abandoned its nuclear program, as Libya’s Colonel Muammar Gaddafi discovered.

Then there is Iran. If the Saudis build a bomb it will be because of their enmity toward Iran. We can argue about whether Iran is a democracy; Saudi Arabia certainly isn’t, and neither state has a decent record on human rights. Yet it is *Iran* which must be kept from

developing a bomb at all costs while the US mulls over a nuclear reactor transfer to the Saudis.

Other fortunate states are in no danger of receiving the treatment the US meted out to Saddam and Gaddafi. Foremost is Israel with its “strategically opaque” nuclear arsenal. And consider a remark Trump made while campaigning for president. Then-candidate Trump said that, much as he hated nuclear proliferation, it might be a good idea if Japan and South Korea and *Saudi Arabia* obtained nuclear weapons.

Hypocritical enforcement of nonproliferation is bad enough. Alarming, the US has also encouraged proliferation through its boosterism for nuclear power (and, not incidentally, US energy companies). What we might call US pro-proliferation efforts trace back at least to President Dwight Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech, delivered before the UN General Assembly in 1953. Eisenhower praised nuclear energy and predicted a future of electrical energy “too cheap to meter.” Eisenhower promised US assistance and technology to developing countries. In return, the recipient states would promise to use nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes. But, as Arianna Rowberry of the Brookings Institution observes:

While well intentioned, the Atoms for Peace program has been criticized for facilitating nuclear proliferation by spreading dual use nuclear technology, *i.e.*, technologies and materials, such as highly enriched uranium, used in early civilian nuclear programs that can also be used for the production of nuclear weapons.

Rowberry notes that Iran was an early beneficiary of the US Atoms for Peace program.

As for America’s own nukes, they’re just fine, and more will be even better. The US itself has an estimated 1,750 strategic nuclear warheads, according to the Washington DC-based Arms Control Association. On December 22, 2017, President Trump tweeted that he wanted the US to “greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability.” Bloomberg speculated that President Trump may have meant nothing more than that he wanted to continue a 2016 proposal from the Obama Administration to spend \$1 trillion over the next 30 years on “modernizing” the US nuclear arsenal. There is more continuity than change in US nuclear policy.

The only sure way to halt nuclear proliferation is to eliminate nuclear weapons. *All* nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, signed last summer, aims to do just that. None of the 56 signatories, however, possess nuclear weapons. Unless one of the world’s nine nuclear powers accedes to the treaty soon, it may join the

1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw war as another futile utopian scheme to create lasting peace.

For the near future, the best hope of stopping the nuclear reactor sale to Saudi Arabia, is pressure on Congress. Under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, Congress has the power to block any transfer of nuclear technology. Making sure Congress blocks the sale presents a combined challenge for the antiwar and anti-nuclear movements. It has been a long time since the antiwar movement, which went into hibernation during the Obama years, had a victory. Here's their chance.