

The U.S.-EU-Russian Nonproliferation Triangle

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On the surface, the war on terror has brought the issue of WMD proliferation to the top of the list of national security concerns for the United States, Russia, and the European Union. The potential of a terrorist exploding a nuclear device somewhere in downtown New York, London, Paris, or Moscow heavily influenced decision makers and led them to immediately elevate nonproliferation in their priority lists and call for stronger international cooperation in the field. However, a broad acceptance of nonproliferation values should not camouflage considerable differences in the interests of these three entities.

The major differences are the following:

- In the European Union and Russia, nonproliferation does not occupy as high a priority as in the United States. The EU's concerns are focused on areas of their neighborhood and to a lesser extent areas of their past colonial dominance. The EU does not play any serious role in such remote regions as East Asia. The primary Russian concern is proliferation among nonstate actors and risks of proliferation among states are often viewed through the prism of nonstate terror.
- While the triangle generally agrees that the major proliferation threat is coming from the Greater Middle East, they differ on the scale of the threat and its specific sources. Many smaller EU countries participate in military actions not because of their threat perceptions, but because of unrelated diplomatic calculations.
- The trio differs in their reactions to threats of proliferation. The United States, the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent Russia, tend to rely more on preventive and unilateral actions. At the same time, the EU core prefers multilateral, legal, institutional, and diplomatic approaches.

In practice, WMD proliferation is not in the same position on the priority lists of the United States, Russia, and the EU. Even before September 11, the United States was the global leader in countering proliferation. In part, Washington sought to prevent weaker powers overseas from challenging U.S. domination in their regions. Obtaining WMD, especially nuclear weapons, could make an undesirable foreign player a sanctuary against possible U.S. military actions, reducing U.S. ability to maneuver diplomatically. The United States was also particularly sensitive about preventing its national territory from

becoming vulnerable to any nuclear attack, except one coming from Russia or China. The latter is a matter of fact and cannot be reversed in the foreseeable future.

The Russians are in a different situation. After the Soviet collapse, they withdrew most of their forces to national territory. They abandoned their forward deployment and, therefore, were no longer concerned if a new state gained nuclear weapons. At the same time, their considerable nuclear predominance over any potential nuclear power has kept them relatively comfortable in their calculations of deterring any potential emerging aggressor from invading Russia or its allies. Moreover, some have even argued, WMD proliferation might bring some benefits because new nuclear powers would challenge U.S. global leadership and new poles in international relations might emerge. WMD proliferation could serve Russia's declared objective of facilitating the emergence of a multipolar world.

As for the European Union, until the early 2000s, it failed to elaborate any common nonproliferation strategy. Some nonnuclear EU members tried to gain political benefits from their nonnuclear status, for instance, by initiating various global disarmament initiatives. Others supported nonproliferation as a criterion of membership in Western institutions. The UK and France, as interventionist powers, partially shared U.S. concerns that new nuclear states might limit their freedom of intervention in non-European areas, although their overseas ambitions were more limited. Like other nuclear powers, they also considered worldwide proliferation as devaluing their own nuclear status and thus, their general standing in world affairs.

After September 11 and the terrorist attacks inside Russia, all three began to pay more attention to nonproliferation. The European Union declared that proliferation was the second largest security threat after terrorism, introduced nonproliferation criteria into Partnership and Cooperation Agreements to be signed with third parties, and major member states pursued more active policies of outreach to potential states of concern such as Iran and Libya. The Russians also became more serious about proliferation threats. For example, the Putin administration now pursues a stricter policy on returning spent fuel from Iran, which was not an issue in 1990s.

The EU, however, concentrated on regions located relatively close to Europe. European diplomacy played an active role in preventing the nuclearization of Iran, which borders potential EU candidate Turkey, and the EU helped to roll back existing WMD programs in Libya, which is separated from Europe by the relatively narrow Mediterranean waters. Unfortunately, the EU failed to formulate any consistent strategy or demonstrate an interest in South, or especially, East Asia. Moreover, European diplomacy in Iran and Libya was motivated primarily not by the urgency of their threat perceptions but by attempts to prevent a possible U.S. use of force.

Because of Russia's vast territory, it is active diplomatically not only in the Greater Middle East, but also in East and South Asia. But Moscow's approach demonstrates that it still does not feel the same level of urgency the United States does in preventing the nuclearization of Iran and North Korea. Policy towards these possible proliferators is determined by political calculations, and nonproliferation priorities occupy relatively secondary positions. Indeed, Russia's top priority is to prevent WMD proliferation from reaching nonstate terrorists linked with Chechens. Therefore, the proliferation among

states is often considered not as a threat per se, but as a possible step in making nuclear weapons available to the terrorists.

The United States, Russia, and the major European powers generally agree that the threat of terrorism arises from fundamentalist Islamic activities rooted in the Greater Middle East. However, the perceived urgency of the threat differs. While the United States and Russia believe the threat is extremely urgent, the Europeans still doubt that it is, indeed, the greatest security challenge. Even after Madrid, the EU countries and publics have not reached a consensus about the scale of the terrorist threat. The majority of smaller NATO and EU nations participate in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq not because they think that such participation would divert the urgent threat coming from those sources, but because of political calculations generally related to maintaining special ties with the United States or in order to achieve their political interests in Europe. Spain, for instance, seeks to increase its standing inside the EU, while the Baltic states seek U.S. support in their policies towards Russia.

Because this participation is motivated not by vital security considerations but by unrelated political interests and calculations, these countries tend not to be very reliable members of the U.S.-led coalitions of the willing. The Spanish example provides an illustration. The conservative Asnar government probably thought, among other things, that supporting the U.S. operation in Iraq would help it to gain better status inside the EU or even a membership in the G8. Instead, Spain became a target of Islamic terrorism—a phenomenon that had never been perceived as a threat to Spanish security. Participation in an Iraqi war had never been accepted by the Spanish public as enhancing its security. As a result, explosions in Madrid on March 11, 2004, stimulated a change of government and rapid withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq. The explosions demonstrated that the government's policy increased the threat to Spain rather than decreased it. The government had to take into account the fact that no democratic country can participate in a war for a long period of time against the will of 90 percent of its voters. However, despite the fact that the Spanish withdrawal was motivated primarily by domestic considerations, it sent the wrong message to the terrorists. Undoubtedly, many of them were convinced that terrorist attacks can force one of the largest European countries to surrender and leave Iraq.

The United States, EU, and Russia also differ on defining the primary sources of the threat. The United States has historically suffered from Palestinian terrorism which was initially based on an ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. Later, after the revolution in Iran, Shi'a radicalism became another source of threat. Until the late 1990s, Washington did not perceive Sunni fundamentalism as a threat: moreover, it was considered a useful political resource in struggling against the former Soviet Union, and later Russia, as well as the Shi'as. Not surprisingly, the United States closed its eyes to Saddam's behavior during the Iran-Iraq War. Only after explosions near the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 did the United States begin to perceive Sunni radicalism as a threat. After September 11, Washington perceives that Shi'a and Sunni fundamentalists, together with Arab nationalism, represent the threat.

This is now the basis for U.S. nonproliferation policy in the area. In the 1980s, Washington closed its eyes to Pakistani nuclear programs because this primarily Sunni

country supported the mujahideen fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. More recently, preoccupation with developments in the Middle East has led to a lack of attention to the North Korean nuclear issue. Although North Korea is definitely perceived as a threat to U.S. interests, in contrast to Middle Eastern proliferators, the threat is not considered as urgent or related to the risk of a terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Traditionally, the Russians have not experienced the risk of Islamic terrorism. The Soviet Union successfully capitalized on the Palestinian cause to promote its influence in the Middle East. In the early 1980s there were debates about whether revolutionary Iran should be considered a threat, but no coherent policy emerged. The risk of Sunni radicalism became a matter of concern during occupation of Afghanistan and has become the primary source of threat perception since 1999, when terrorists of Wahhabi origin were involved in the bombing of apartment blocks in Moscow and some other Russian cities. In a mirror image of U.S. tactics, Russia sought to use the Shi'a fundamentalists and Arab nationalists to counter the Sunni threat.

This meant significant differences in U.S. and Russian policies. Moscow has never evaluated radical Shi'a Iranian ayatollahs as a major threat. Only since the early 2000s has it recognized that new nuclear states like Iran and North Korea could become an additional channel for the transfer of WMD technologies and materials to hostile nonstate actors. At the same time, Russia was much more concerned by the Pakistani nuclear arsenals because of the close links between Islamabad and the Taliban, which in turn, maintained links with the Chechens. Another concern involved possible Saudi participation in Pakistani nuclear developments, due to Saudi money used to spread Wahhabism inside the post-Soviet space. Graduates of Wahhabi schools were involved with the worst terrorist attacks inside Russia.

Europeans have suffered primarily from Palestinian terrorists, while radicalism from both Sunni and Shi'a origins has never been a primary subject of European security concerns. This leads to a perception, widely shared in Europe, that once the Palestinian issue is solved, the risk of Islamic terrorism will be settled as well. In terms of nonproliferation, this makes Europeans more critical than the United States (and perhaps even Russia) towards Israeli nuclear capabilities. At the same time, like Russia, they do not feel a major threat coming from Iran; like the United States, they do not see a threat from Pakistan.

The urgency of the security threat arising from the Greater Middle East also defines the different levels of readiness of the three in responding to proliferation threats. The United States (with the UK) and Russia declared and demonstrated higher readiness to act militarily, unilaterally, and preemptively. At the same time, the majority of other European nations are still more committed to multilateral, institutional, and diplomatic approaches.

The aforementioned nuances in the nonproliferation approaches of the United States, Russia, and the rest of Europe, allow us to better understand limits of possible cooperation in the area. The differences might lead to disputes similar to that between Russia and the United States over Iran. At the same time, the differences permit a distribution of roles: the EU and Russia took the lead in diplomatic efforts aimed at convincing Iran to sign the Additional Protocol and freeze its uranium enrichment

program, while the Bush administration did not get its hands dirty by negotiating a deal with the Iranians. The differences also help to motivate some players to engage more actively. In 2003, the leading EU troika launched a diplomatic initiative vis-à-vis Iran in order to prevent a possible military solution to the nuclear issue. Therefore, while the differences may create problems in the nonproliferation issue, if understood and managed well they can be a source of U.S.-Russian-European cooperation.

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