Adam Gincel

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The NPT

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was a good idea, put in place at a time when, if left unchecked, the dissemination of Nuclear Weapons could have jeopardized the safety of humanity. Unfortunately, some countries, including the US, have found ways around some of its rules. Israel, in particular, is a sticking point regarding the NPT – it is a “public secret” that the country has nuclear weapons. By not acknowledging this fact, the US can still aid them without directly violating the NPT. This is an oversight, though it is one that could be covered with stricter scrutiny on Israel, pressuring them to sign onto the treaty.

The Vela Incident is a key example of how this blind spot of the NPT can cause problems. A suspected joint South African-Israeli Nuclear Test took place during the limited Nuclear Test Ban. Instead of wanting to call out our ally, we looked for a way to dismiss our findings and claim it was an error. This was necessary because to claim otherwise would be to publicly admit that Israel has nuclear weapons. If not for the complicated state of Israel, I believe the NPT is working as intended. Perhaps some slight modifications to make certain parts more strict would have helped alleviate this edge case, but overall I believe the NPT is doing a good job as it. As it stands it has the widest adherence out of any arms treaty known to man – only Israel, South Sudan, India, and Pakistan not currently on it. The absence of these four states is unfortunate, and is a problem area for the treaty and those who follow it, and any modifications to the NPT should be towards the sections regarding interactions with non-signatories, which, unfortunately, are already fairly well written and comprehensive. Article I reads:

“Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; and not in any way to assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear weapon State to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, or control over such weapons or explosive devices.”

This is very hard to get around. The US is currently in a position to argue that it is not transferring nuclear weapons and is not otherwise assisting Israel with nuclear matters.

Israel has been using the argument that it will not be the country to “introduce” nuclear weapons to the middle east. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists) However, its definition of “introduce” is very deliberate. US Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke asked: “Then in your view, an unadvertised, untested nuclear device is not a nuclear weapon?” Israel’s response was simply “Yes, that is correct.” The followup question was “so, an advertised but untested device or weapon would constitute introduction?” Israel confirmed that that is their definition of introduction. Put simply, this means a country developing nuclear weapons that refuses to go public about them is somehow considered a “non-nuclear” country by the NPT, and is subject to different rules. This seems like an oversight by the NPT to me, and should probably be the focus of any modifications.

I think it would be very difficult to argue for the abolition of the NPT. The message it sends is one of global unity regarding not destroying ourselves, which I think is very noble. To remove it would be a step backwards, a step back towards mutually assured destruction. Unfortunately, countries skirting around some of the rules still pose a threat to the stability of the modern world, and perhaps some stricter scrutiny or slight modifications are needed to improve the effectiveness of the treaty, and to cover some of the more unexpected edge cases.