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The concern is no longer if, but when

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Discouraging proliferation in the age of atomic weapons is becoming harder than ever.

When India and Pakistan tested their nuclear weapons in 1998, a wise and experienced diplomat gave me a sober prediction. Australia would respond with outrage, he said, but the US would acquiesce to these new nuclear powers, and the rest of the world would follow. India and Pakistan would therefore pay no substantial penalty.

On the contrary, he predicted that India would gain immense new status and self-confidence as a nuclear power. How then, he asked, could we ever expect to persuade Iran and North Korea to stop building nuclear weapons? Would the whole global non-proliferation framework crumble?

There are certainly some gloomy signs he was right. In May at the United Nations, countries from around the world met to review the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The meeting was a complete failure. And last month's election of the hard-line conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's new President set back hopes that moderate reformers in Iran might be persuaded to slow Iran's nuclear program. In fact those hopes were probably always a bit forlorn. Few Iranians think Iran should abandon development of weapons-related nuclear technology. If India and Pakistan - and Israel - can have nuclear weapons, why not Iran? Not an easy question to answer.

After the Cold War, it seemed reasonable to hope we might be able to eliminate nuclear weapons. In 1995 Paul Keating convened a high-powered global commission to promote the idea. Now, unfortunately, it is becoming plain that nuclear weapons are going to be with us for a long time to come. Instead of hoping they will go away, we need to work hard on practical measures to make sure we can continue to live with them.

The darkest points on the non-proliferation map at present are Iran and North Korea. The diplomatic campaigns to persuade them to abandon their nuclear weapons program are going nowhere. This is not necessarily the fault of the diplomats: it is a reflection of the raw facts of power and influence. The international community cannot or will not impose on either country the kind of pressure needed to persuade them to abandon programs which both governments apparently believe is critical to their national interests.

Diplomacy has been backed by threats that unless each country's nuclear program is abandoned, the matter will be referred to the UN Security Council, which might impose economic sanctions. But these threats are empty. Both China and Russia have a veto on the Security Council and would probably oppose sanctions on either Iran or North Korea. They have their reasons: China, for example, is building a strong relationship with Iran as a supplier of energy. And even if the Security Council did agree to impose economic sanctions, it is not clear they would work. They seldom do.

Beyond economic sanctions lie the military options: either limited strikes against nuclear facilities, or full-scale invasion and regime change. Neither option is practical policy against Iran or North Korea.

Limited strike campaigns suffer from a fatal lack of intelligence. Without a lucky intelligence break, the US and its allies simply do not know enough about where either country's critical facilities are hidden to be able to reliably target their nuclear programs effectively.

How about invasion? Even if America's ground forces were not already at full stretch in Iraq, it would be doubtful that an invasion of either Iran or North Korea would seem practical policy even to the Bush Administration.

But with the bulk of its army in Iraq indefinitely, the US simply lacks the forces to invade Iran or North Korea.

It seems then that there is no way to stop them. The most likely outcome is that within a few years both Iran and North Korea will have nuclear weapons. North Korea most probably has a small number already. So we need to start asking how we can best live with these new nuclear powers.

Nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea poses four kinds of risk. The first risk is that either government would choose to use their weapons deliberately. To guard against this we have no alternative but to rely on old-fashioned deterrence. The men who rule in Tehran and Pyongyang will need to be brought to understand they cannot use their nuclear weapons without risking nuclear retaliation.

Deterrence is not foolproof, because there is always a chance of miscalculation. But the long dangerous decades of the Cold War showed that it can work. There is no reason why Israel and Iran, for example, should not establish the kind of more or less stable nuclear deterrent balance that characterised the Cold War. Fortunately that is what seems to be happening between India and Pakistan. We need to look for ways to strengthen deterrence in these situations.

Second, nuclear weapons might be fired by a regime in the final stages of collapse. For example, there are fears the leaders of an imploding North Korea might launch nuclear attacks as an irrational act of defiance and revenge. This risk can hardly be dismissed in a place like North Korea, where regime collapse seems a real possibility, and it cannot be deterred. They provide the best argument for modest national missile defences.

Third, nuclear weapons could find their way into the hands of terrorists. This is perhaps the biggest danger from nuclear proliferation today. Iranian and North Korean stockpiles add to the existing risks that nuclear weapons could be sold or stolen from Pakistani or Russian arsenals.

This suggests that some of the counter-proliferation policy focus should shift from trying to stop the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs to trying to stop leakage from those programs. The Proliferation Security Initiative is one important step in this direction.

Finally, there is the fear that each time another country acquires nuclear weapons, it encourages yet more to do the same.

Who might be next? The lesson of recent years is that it is hard to stop a nuclear weapons program once it has begun. So the best place to focus our efforts is on discouraging countries from starting down this path in the first place. With nuclear energy again on the global agenda, this will be harder, and more important, than ever.