How to Live With the Bomb

BY TODD SECHSER

In May 1997, during a routine flight over Pakistan’s densely populated metropolis of Karachi, a Mirage III jet fighter accidentally dropped two fuselage tanks. The tanks fell to earth and exploded, killing 10 people. Had the accident involved a nuclear weapon, the result would have resembled the blasts that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Such a scenario is not so far-fetched. During the Cold War, dozens of U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft carrying nuclear warheads crashed or accidentally dropped their bombs over U.S. soil and coastal waters. Safety devices prevented the nuclear warheads from detonating. But because India and Pakistan do not possess such devices, accidental detonation, not deliberate attack, is the most likely scenario for modern-day nuclear devastation.

More than 30 nations have the capacity to build nuclear weapons; another five hover near the threshold of a nuclear capability. These numbers are sure to increase. Stocks of fissile material, produced in civilian nuclear reactors sold by America’s Western allies, continue to grow, while chaos in the former Soviet Union threatens to disperse nuclear materials and scientists to states with budding nuclear weapons programs. Cash-hungry countries like Pakistan and North Korea might also export nuclear materials or technology.

New proliferants have proven unable and unwilling to invest in the essential safety technologies that guard the U.S. nuclear arsenal against accidental or unauthorized use. Neither Israel nor China, for instance, is thought to have installed “permissive action links,” electronic combination locks that prevent unauthorized people from arming a nuclear warhead or missile. Inadequate safety and command systems raise several risks: unauthorized launches by overzealous junior commanders, sabotage or theft by terrorist organizations, even inadvertent launches and detonations. At worst, shoddy warning computers might falsely detect an attack, sparking a deliberate but mistaken nuclear retaliation.

These catastrophic scenarios are especially likely in proliferation-prone regions such as South Asia and the Middle East. In these unstable parts of the world, religious fervor thrives, terrorist organizations appear powerful and well-funded, and close proximity to potential targets gives commanders only minutes to double-check computerized launch warnings.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has kept its nuclear safety technologies cloaked in secrecy. Although the 1954 Atomic Energy Act explicitly permits nuclear safety cooperation with other states, U.S. nuclear-safety assistance has been limited to Britain and France. The recent addition of India and Pakistan to the “declared” nuclear club provides an excellent opportunity for the U.S. to face the new era of proliferation squarely and expand nuclear safety cooperation.

India and Pakistan have neither the financial resources nor the technological base to develop the electronic locks and protective arming devices employed on U.S. nuclear forces. At a minimum, Washington should declassify basic nuclear safety technologies and permit the sale of electronic locks and early-warning systems to nascent nuclear powers.

Although declassifying the most advanced safety devices would compromise the security of U.S. weapons, simpler but nonetheless effective versions could be approved for international sale. Even the most rudimentary safety systems would dramatically reduce the risk of a nuclear accident in India, Pakistan and elsewhere. By providing reliable launch detection systems to the subcontinent, Washington also would increase the confidence of India and Pakistan in their ability to retaliate in the event of attack, relieving pressures to strike preemptively.

The natural objection to such a proposal is that it tacitly condones nuclear proliferation. But safety assistance is far less encouraging to aspiring proliferators than Washington’s tacit endorsement of Israel’s nuclear status or its halfhearted sanctions against India and Pakistan, which have inflicted less than $7 million of punishment to date. In reality, the greatest service the U.S. can perform is preventing nuclear use—accidental or otherwise.

Mr. Sechser is a research analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.