

Nuclear Weapons and Nonproliferation during the Cold War: A ReassessmentJoseph F. Pilat, Los Alamos National Laboratory¹

In the post-Cold War period, the role of nuclear weapons during the Cold War has been the subject of a great debate. Nuclear weapons have been attacked or defended in the current debates based in part on perceptions of their historic role. It is argued by some that US and Soviet nuclear weapons drove proliferation. Others argue that these weapons allowed extended deterrence, which has been praised as a more effective nonproliferation instrument than the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Or it is proffered by some that nuclear weapon stability (e.g., the fear of catalytic war) was the underlying reason for the demonstrable mutual interest of the United States and the Soviet Union in nonproliferation, an area that during the chills and thaws of the Cold War provided an oasis of cooperation and, at particularly difficult times, the only area for bilateral engagement. On the other hand, it is argued that the dangers of proliferation often appeared secondary in both US and Soviet political and military thinking and planning—in the US view a lesser included case for the superpowers' nuclear arsenals, and that the priority of dealing with proliferation did not prevent the Soviet Union from aiding China's nascent program or the United States from placing other foreign and defense policy interests higher than nonproliferation when there were tensions and conflicts. All of these views concerning the impact of nuclear weapons on proliferation and nonproliferation during the Cold War cannot be true. To what extent do they reflect reality and to what extent myth? What were the real political-military and technological relations among nuclear weapons, proliferation and nonproliferation during the Cold War, and what if any of those relations survived its end? These questions are not only academic. Views on the underlying issues are critical to understanding the historical role of nuclear weapons as well as the current debates over the future of nuclear weapons, proliferation threats and nonproliferation efforts.

¹ The views expressed are the author's own and not those of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Department of Energy or any other agency.