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A dangerous business

Nuclear Proliferation Today, by Leonard S. Spector (Vintage)

By Walt Patterson

The problem of proliferation starts with "proliferation". Five syllables of abstract obscurity do little to drive home the implications of Colonel Gaddafi with nuclear weapons. We seem, unfortunately, to be stuck with this leaden label, however much it hampers popular recognition of perhaps the gravest threat now facing humanity: the probability that more and more fingers will soon be hovering over nuclear triggers.

Accordingly, the title of Sandy Spector's report for the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace would not catch many passing eyes on an airport bookstall. But the report is as readable as a thriller, and despite its level-headed tone it is a great deal more hair-raising. In lean and businesslike prose and meticulous detail Spector describes how an alarming array of countries - eight in particular - has been working to acquire nuclear weapons. Some, such as Israel and South Africa, almost certainly have nuclear weapons already; others, such as Pakistan and Argentina, may soon join them. The consequences for global political stability will be grave.

What is especially extraordinary is the role played by the countries exporting nuclear knowledge. The United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union have, on the face of it, an obvious vested interest in trying to keep other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, all these countries, and other nuclear industrial countries with a similar interest, have repeatedly entered into generous commercial contracts with "near-nuclear" countries which refuse to subscribe to international safeguards and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Spector cites numerous examples of such perverse shortsightedness.

Some of Spector's case histories have already moved on significantly: in January 1985, for example, the British and French governments were wrapping up a secret package of lavish export credits to finance the sale of the Guangdong nuclear power station to China. China is still exploding nuclear weapons in the atmosphere; it has never accepted international safeguards; it will have nothing to do with the Non-Proliferation Treaty; and it is reliably reported to have assisted Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, as Spector discusses. It would be fascinating to hear the British government explain how it reconciles the Guangdong agreement with Britain's role as one of the three sponsors of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The third review conference of treaty members takes place in Geneva in September; if, as now appears entirely possible, the treaty collapses, Britain will be one of the countries most responsible.

The British government is but one among many offenders whose shortsighted self-interest is spreading nuclear weapons around the world, as Spector makes all too clear. He is an experienced American analyst of the international nuclear scene, and knows exactly where most, if not all, the bodies are buried. Fully a quarter of the book is taken up by exhaustive notes, references and appendices.

The book is written from an American perspective, but is much less insular in outlook than most American writing on nuclear issues. *Nuclear Proliferation Today* is intended to be the first of a series of annual reports on the spread of nuclear weapons. It and its successors will be essential reading for the gradually growing number of people who have realised the immediacy and urgency of the problem that hides behind the jargon-word "proliferation".

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