The Politics of Weapons Inspections: Assessing WMD Monitoring and Verification Regimes


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In their new book, The Politics of Weapons Inspections: Assessing WMD Monitoring and Verification Regimes, Nathan Busch and Joseph Pilat aim to highlight ambiguities of monitoring and verification (M&V) to show that M&V cannot with certainty prove the absence or total elimination of a WMD (weapons of mass destruction) program. They also emphasize that M&V programs can be strengthened with additional inclusion of third-party information, wide-area environmental sampling (WAES), and expanded use of the random challenge inspections authorized under existing treaties.

The authors begin the book with a review of the features and criticisms of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The book then reiterates the role of M&V agreements in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and biological weapons. After a brief review of what one means by M&V regimes (chapter 1), they highlight three historical case studies: South Africa, Iraq, and Libya (chapters 2-4). They then study the question of how M&V may be applied to the global disarmament targeted in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) (chapter 5). Finally, they use these historical lessons to address the difficult cases of North Korea, Iran, and Syria (chapter 6). Throughout the book they highlight that nuclear programs are easier to monitor and to verify than biological or chemical weapons programs. They conclude with a call for improved research and development for M&V and review the need for greater use of third-party information, more widespread adoption of the additional protocol (AP) regarding International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, increased challenge inspections, and improvements to biological weapons M&V. Finally, they remind readers about the ambiguities associated with M&V and the need to consider latent capabilities and enforcement.

This book focuses on a critical topic for national defense, and it will be valuable to anyone wishing to review possible limitations of past M&V programs. Because the M&V efforts have had a long history and have the risk of being oversold, this book is important as a concise history of significant WMD M&V examples, with lessons for current and future challenges. The authors clearly hope that the book’s lessons will inform the reader how best to perform M&V in future complicated cases such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria. They highlight the existence of ambiguity and uncertainty in all M&V programs, which they equate implicitly to risk. The M&V regime is a tool for addressing dilemmas associated with the increased risk in the scenario where multiple parties agree to disarm together, or where defeat terms require one side to disarm to ensure decreased threats to the victors. The dilemma exists because the nation being inspected also has politics, prestige, and security concerns that contribute to their decision calculus. With this purpose of M&V identified, Busch and Pilat miss a timely opportunity to look beyond the story that ambiguity/uncertainty/risk exists and toward assessing the politics of M&V from the perspective of the nation disarming.

Looking specifically at nuclear (not chemical or biological) disarmament and dismantlement, in each historical case presented the authors identify uncertainties in the process by which a regime could have cheated but
not the politics that, as examined post mortem, placed the them in the position where they disarmed and dismantled yet did not fully cooperate with the M&V process. In this manner, the uncertainties do not equate to risk. Consider that in the cases of South Africa’s apartheid regime, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein regime, and Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi regime, each government or leader chose to concede to international pressure (economic or military) and abandon their previously rogue nuclear WMD program. In each case the regime’s survival time afterward was short, suggesting that the regimes had other elements of their own security concerns that were left unbalanced by the M&V program.

In South Africa, the Frederik de Klerk government undertook unilateral nuclear disarmament in part to prevent a black-majority government from possessing a nuclear bomb (p. 53) and in part to gain international favor and standing, but it did so in a manner that could not be easily verified by M&V programs of the IAEA. This suggests that the dying apartheid regime, even in its final few years, saw higher costs or risk in M&V while disarming than in failing to gain the benefits of NPT membership. In Iraq, a post-mortem study of the Saddam regime shows he decided to disarm in 1991, but chose to do so in a unilateral manner not verifiable by inspectors because of cultural and regional security concerns.[3] One might argue that the inability of the nuclear M&V program to adapt to the cultural realities of the disarming nation led to the Iraq war in 2003. This adaptation would have been difficult, but this difficulty is closer to the heart of M&V politics and future challenges than the uncertainties highlighted in the book.

In the case of Libya, again the authors fail to identify any cheating on nuclear dismantlement after Libya’s 2003 nuclear declarations and dismantlement, but they do say that the Qadhafi regime regretted its decision due to the lack of benefits (p. 120). In each historical case the M&V demands for low uncertainty manifested in political risks or costs to the disarming nation that were so high that these nations either undertook disarming without M&V (South Africa), hid the disarming from the M&V regime (Iraq), or regretted disarming (Libya). In each case the disarming regime ceased to exist within a decade, suggesting other regimes will not view the rollback path as a politically promising one. The assessment of nuclear M&V programs in the book successfully shows that uncertainty and potential opportunities for cheating still exist, but the authors fail to use the three case studies to assess the M&V programs’ effectiveness, risk to both parties, or political viability as viewed from a regime willing to disarm. The low uncertainty may not be politically enough for the victors or the international community, but the low uncertainty program also clearly resulted in legitimate risks for the disarming regime.

A strong point of the book is identifying examples of political pressures in the M&V process. For example, in the South African case the authors observe that the nation’s cooperation led the IAEA to hold them to a lowered standard (p. 73). In Iraq, we find the IAEA’s efforts to avoid war colored its reports (p. 80). The standards for M&V were again lowered in Libya because the Bush administration wanted to highlight a nonproliferation success (p. 134). Repeatedly, the book observes that the Chemical Weapons Convention parties have agreed to anytime, anywhere inspections (pp. 35, 127), but the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons does not exercise that authority. The United States has accused many signatories of violations without specific evidence that could be used under the existing M&V programs (p. 35).

There is another minor omission in the book. The authors list accidental violations as issues for M&V in the introduction and conclusion (pp. 19, 246), but they fail to recognize that some supposed cheating was actually an accidental violation. They used a 2014 New York Times article about chemical weapons discovered in Iraq as evidence of Iraq cheating. However, the reality is that Iraq just lost track of the chemical weapons produced during wartime in the 1980s.[4]

In summary, Busch and Pilat provide a long list of possible uncertainties associated with M&V programs. They identify several critical elements that will strengthen M&V programs such as expanded adoption of the additional protocol and unannounced inspections, but they fail to provide an assessment as weighed against an alternative. Authors looking to validate a belief that M&V regimes have residual uncertainties and potential for cheating will be happy with the book. Those looking for an assessment of M&V programs aimed at improving effectiveness will need to augment the book with other resources.

Notes

[1]. This review reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Air War College, the US Department of Defense, or any other entity.

[2]. See for example Stephen Meyer’s discussion on the difference between risk and uncertainty: “Verifica-


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