

# NUCLEAR POLITICS: THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF PROLIFERATION

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**ABSTRACT**

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Why do states acquire nuclear weapons? How does the security environment shape a state's decision to "go nuclear"? Are there particular strategic conditions that make states more likely to develop the bomb? Conversely, are there strategic circumstances that make nuclear forbearance more likely? When is a nuclear power such as the United States more likely to be successful at preventing another state – friend or foe – from acquiring the bomb?

*Nuclear Politics* answers these questions by focusing on the security environment surrounding a state during its nuclear development. In doing so, it makes three contributions to the scholarly and policy literatures on nuclear proliferation. First, it advances the first security-based theory of proliferation that accounts for the limited spread of nuclear weapons. By refining existing security arguments and integrating them in a strategic-interaction approach, our book shows that a security-based view of proliferation is consistent with the historical record and superior to existing theoretical alternatives in explaining most significant decisions to acquire or forfeit nuclear weapons. Our theory starts from the observation that the spread of nuclear weapons is a dynamic process in which the interests of several states interact. Our contribution to the theoretical literature on proliferation is to place security arguments in the context of the strategic interaction that takes place between the potential proliferator, its adversaries, and, when present, its allies. In doing so, we provide a necessary corrective to the existing literature, which focuses either on the motivations of the state that attempts to acquire nuclear weapons or on the motivations of other states to thwart its ambition. To understand the role played by security concerns in proliferation, we need to look at both demand and supply, analyzing their net effect. The odds of proliferation, we contend, are largely determined by the strategic interaction between a state deciding whether to acquire nuclear weapons and its adversaries. This interaction is shaped by the potential proliferator's ability to deter a preventive strike on its nuclear program prior to acquiring the bomb. This ability, in turn, hinges on the proliferator's relative power and whether it benefits from the protection of an ally capable and willing to defend it. The higher the potential proliferator's relative power, the greater the likelihood that it will develop the bomb unimpeded whenever it deems its security benefit to be worth the cost of a nuclear program. Absent sufficient relative power to deter a preventive strike, security guarantees extended by an ally may give a state the opportunity to nuclearize. Not all states with powerful sponsors proliferate, however. Should a protégé expect its ally to remain a reliable guarantor of its security, it would lack the willingness to acquire the bomb. Conversely, should it expect that pursuing nuclear weapons would result in abandonment by its ally prior to acquiring the bomb, it might be exposed to a preventive strike and not have the opportunity to go nuclear. Therefore, a weak state is likely to acquire nuclear weapons only when it possesses a powerful ally that is neither willing to offer reliable future protection guarantees nor able to issue consequential threats of immediate abandonment.

Along with this theoretical contribution, *Nuclear Politics* contributes to our understanding of the history of the nuclear age by including sixteen detailed historical cases of attempted proliferation, describing the security environment each of these states faced during their nuclear development phase in terms of their relationships with adversaries and allies. Specifically, the book includes case studies of Brazil, China, France, India, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Japan, North Korea, Pakistan, South Africa, South Korea, the Soviet Union, Sweden, Taiwan, and West Germany. Our case studies cover the most important and policy relevant cases of nuclear development of the past seven decades, including both states that eventually succeeded in acquiring the bomb and others that eschewed their nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, *Nuclear Politics* includes shorter cases of five other states (Bulgaria, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Turkey) that were, according to the existing literature, particularly likely to have developed nuclear weapons – if extant security-based

theories of proliferation are right – but have nevertheless eschewed any nuclear ambitions. Finally, the book also contains shorter vignettes of all other cases of nuclear development documented to date (Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Egypt, Italy, Libya, Romania, Switzerland, Syria, the United Kingdom, United States, and Yugoslavia). To build these analytic narratives, *Nuclear Politics* draws on a vast array of secondary and primary sources in multiple languages. While not being primarily a history book, at an average of 7,000 words per historical case, *Nuclear Politics* features what to our knowledge is the broadest, deepest treatment of the strategic environment faced by states while they attempt to acquire the bomb.

Finally, *Nuclear Politics* makes an important contribution to debates on U.S. non-proliferation policy. Over the past few years, scholars have renewed their interest on U.S. nuclear policy and, specifically, its efforts at deterring others from acquiring the bomb. By focusing on the strategic interaction of the state that is considering the nuclear option, its enemies, and its allies, *Nuclear Politics* provides both a theory of proliferation and a theory of non-proliferation, i.e., an account of how the security environment shapes the comparative effectiveness of different policy tools with which the United States can try to deter other states from “going nuclear.” As our theory makes clear, different strategic environments call for different non-proliferation tools. A U.S. non-proliferation effort based on “carrots” – i.e., offers of greater U.S. commitment to the potential proliferator’s security if it abandons its nuclear ambitions – is more likely to work when U.S. security interests overlap significantly with those of the state considering nuclear weapons. Furthermore, such a carrots-based approach is easier to implement vis-à-vis states that have a relatively good ability to deter their adversaries on their own, who will therefore require smaller additional commitments to their security in order to forfeit the nuclear option. When, on the contrary, a potential proliferator is particularly weak vis-à-vis its adversaries, a U.S. non-proliferation policy based on “sticks” – i.e., threats of U.S. abandonment if the state insists in pursuing the nuclear option – is more likely to be effective. Such threats are, moreover, more credible when the security interests of the potential proliferator are not entirely aligned with those of the United States. Finally, when the security interests of the United States are antithetical to those of the state considering nuclear weapons, the effectiveness of U.S. counter-proliferation efforts depends on the credibility of threats to strike the country’s nuclear program preventively. When those threats are credible, softer counter-proliferation measures are likely to be effective. When the cost of striking the program preventively is excessive (compared with the loss in U.S. security that would result from proliferation) then U.S. efforts at stymieing the spread of nuclear weapons are likely to fail. By highlighting how the strategic environment shapes the best approach to deter other countries from going nuclear, *Nuclear Politics* aims at advancing analysis and debate on U.S. non-proliferation policy.