Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy

by

Mark Stephen Bell

Submitted to the Department of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on July 19, 2016 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

ABSTRACT

How do states change their foreign policies when they acquire nuclear weapons? This question is central to both academic and policy debates about the consequences of nuclear proliferation, and the lengths that the United States and other states should go to to prevent proliferation. Despite this importance to scholars and practitioners, existing literature has largely avoided answering this question.

This dissertation aims to fill this gap. In answering this question, I first offer a typology of conceptually distinct and empirically distinguishable foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate. Specifically, I distinguish between aggression, expansion, independence, bolstering, steadfastness, and compromise. The typology allows scholars and practitioners to move beyond catch-all terms such as “emboldenment” when thinking about how states may change their foreign policies after nuclear acquisition. Second, I offer a theory for why different states use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of these behaviors. I argue that states in different geopolitical circumstances have different political priorities. Different states therefore find different combinations of foreign policy behaviors attractive, and thus use nuclear weapons to facilitate different foreign policy behaviors. The theory uses a sequence of three variables—the existence of severe territorial threats or an ongoing war, the presence of senior allies, and the state’s power trajectory—to predict the combinations of foreign policy behaviors states will use nuclear weapons to facilitate. Third, I test the theory using case studies of the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the United States, each drawing on interviews and multi-archival research. In each case, I look for discontinuities in the state’s foreign policy behaviors that occur at the point of nuclear acquisition and use process tracing to assess whether nuclear weapons caused the changes observed.

The dissertation makes several contributions. It provides an answer to a foundational question about the nuclear revolution: how do states use nuclear weapons to facilitate their goals in international politics? It offers a new dependent variable and theory with potentially broader applicability to other questions about comparative foreign policy. Finally, it offers policy-relevant insights into how new nuclear states might behave in the future.

Thesis Supervisor: Barry R. Posen
Title: Ford International Professor of Political Science
# Contents

**List of Tables**

List of Tables 9

**List of Figures**

List of Figures 11

**List of Abbreviations**

List of Abbreviations 13

**Acknowledgments**

Acknowledgments 15

1 Introduction

1.1 The question and its importance 19
1.2 Summary of the argument 22
1.3 The structure of the dissertation 30

2 Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy

2.1 Existing theories 32
2.2 Effects of nuclear weapons 38
2.2.1 Assumptions 39
2.2.2 Mechanisms 42
2.2.3 Typology of behaviors 44
2.2.4 Is the typology exhaustive? 54
2.2.5 Behaviors and goals 56
2.3 Theory: Nuclear opportunism and the primacy of politics 56
2.3.1 Variable 1: Serious territorial threat or ongoing war 58
2.3.2 Variable 2: Presence of a senior ally 62
2.3.3 Variable 3: Power trajectory 65
2.4 Empirical strategy 70
2.4.1 What are we trying to estimate? 70
2.4.2 Approach to finding the counterfactual 71
2.4.3 Shortcomings 76
2.4.4 Measurement 79
2.5 Alternative explanations 82
2.5.1 Strategic pessimism 83
2.5.2 Defensive realism 85
2.5.3 Norms over time 87
2.6 Case selection 89
List of Tables

1.1 Typology of behaviors .................................................. 23
2.1 The dimensions underlying the typology .......................................................... 55
3.1 Summary of predictions in the British case ...................................................... 104
3.2 Relative performance of the four explanations in the British case .................. 143
4.1 Summary of predictions in the South African case ........................................... 159
4.2 Relative performance of the four explanations in the South African case .......... 188
5.1 Summary of predictions in the U.S. case, wartime ........................................ 199
5.2 Relative performance of the four explanations in the U.S. case, wartime .......... 213
5.3 Summary of predictions in the U.S. case, postwar ......................................... 218
5.4 Relative performance of the four explanations in the U.S. case, postwar .......... 243
List of Figures

1.1 The theory of nuclear opportunism ............................................. 25
2.1 Nuclear opportunism .................................................................. 59
2.2 Hypothesis 1: States facing serious territorial threats or engaged in war ...... 61
2.3 Hypothesis 2: States not facing serious territorial threats but with senior allies . 64
2.4 Hypothesis 3: Rising powers not facing serious territorial threats .............. 67
2.5 Hypothesis 4: States not rising in power and not facing serious territorial threats 69
3.1 Predictions in the British case ...................................................... 98
3.2 Militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) involving Britain over time .............. 105
4.1 Predictions in the South African case ........................................... 151
4.2 Southern Africa ........................................................................ 153
4.3 Major South African operations in Angola, 1975-1985 ........................... 161
5.1 Predictions in the U.S. case, wartime .......................................... 197
5.2 Predictions in the U.S. case, post-war .......................................... 216
6.1 Theoretical pathway for Iran ......................................................... 257
List of Abbreviations

AEC South African Atomic Energy Corporation
AIOC Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
ANC African National Congress
ANZUS Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty
APOC Anglo-Persian Oil Company
ARAMCO Arabian American Oil Company
CHUR Churchill Archives
CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CINC Composite Index of National Capabilities
DNSA Digital National Security Archive
FAPLA People’s Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola
FNLA National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRELIMO Liberation Front of Mozambique
FRUS Foreign Relations of the United States
GNP Gross National Product
HEU Highly Enriched Uranium
IMF International Monetary Fund
JCS Joint Chiefs of Staff
JIC British Joint Intelligence Committee
MID Militarized Interstate Dispute
MK Umkhonte we Sizwe
MPLA Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NATO  North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIC  National Identity Conception
NSA  National Security Archive
NSC  National Security Council
OAU  Organisation of African Unity
OPC  Office of Policy Coordination
PLAN  People’s Liberation Army of Namibia
PRC  People’s Republic of China
RAF  Royal Air Force
SAC  Strategic Air Command
SADF  South African Defence Force
SAP  South African Police
SEATO  South East Asia Treaty Organization
SWAPO  South West African People’s Organization
UKNA  United Kingdom National Archives
UN  United Nations
UNITA  National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been started, let alone finished, without a great many people. My committee has influenced and shaped the entire project, and provided extraordinary support while doing so. Barry Posen has been an exemplary chair. His willingness to engage with every nut and bolt of the argument, and offer line by line comments on multiple iterations of the work has gone way beyond the call of duty. The quality and impact of his scholarship is a model that I will only ever aspire to meet; his demand that scholars tackle important questions is one I will continue to seek to live up to. I was extremely fortunate to arrive at MIT as a first year graduate student at the same time as Vipin Narang arrived as a first year Assistant Professor. Vipin has provided prompt and invaluable advice on more substantive and strategic matters relating to the dissertation, academia, and life, than I can count since I first bothered him in his graduate student office at Harvard seeking advice on where to pursue a Ph.D. Taylor Fravel’s advice has substantially increased the clarity of the argument and writing throughout the dissertation, and his questions and comments have consistently cut to the core theoretical and empirical issues throughout the dissertation. Last but certainly not least, Frank Gavin arrived at MIT after I had defended my prospectus, but enthusiastically came on board my committee, and his intellectual influence is throughout the dissertation. His commitment to bringing historians and political scientists together to collectively examine questions of importance to public policy has been profoundly influential, and his skill at organizing academic conferences in attractive locations has provided very enjoyable breaks from Cambridge on several occasions. Collectively, the committee provided a level of expertise on nuclear issues that would have been impossible to assemble at almost any other institution,
but the personal support and advice they have provided at every turn has perhaps been even more valuable.

As an undergraduate, Nigel Bowles and Paul Martin encouraged my interest in the academic study of politics, and guided me through the process of writing an undergraduate thesis. I would not have considered pursuing graduate studies in political science (let alone actually done so) done so without their influence or advice. And at Harvard Kennedy School, where I spent two years deliberating whether to pursue a career in academia or policy while getting a Masters in Public Policy, Matt Bunn inspired the interest in nuclear issues that motivated me to pursue a Ph.D and has sustained this entire project.

I have learnt a huge amount from the tight-knit community of graduate students at MIT who provided intellectual stimulation, encouragement, and friendship, and generally made six years of graduate school more enjoyable than it had any right to be. Gender diversity was lacking in my cohort of Noel Anderson, James Conran, Brian Haggerty, Alec Worsnop, Peter Swartz, and Yiqing Xu, but nothing else was. From other years, Dan Altman, Lena Andrews, Chris Clary, Krista Loose, Nicholas Miller, Amanda Rothschild, Josh Shifrinson, Steve Wittels, Ketian Zhang, and many others, all deserve special thanks. Other graduate students from other institutions provided friendship and advice as well as comments and suggestions, including Paul Avey, James Cameron, Gene Gerzhoy, Eliza Gheorghe, Galen Jackson, Patricia Kim, John Marshall, Rupal Mehta, Rohan Mukherjee, Evan Perkoski, Michael Poznansky, Rob Schub, Jane Vaynmann, Rachel Whitlark, Cat Worsnop, and especially Julia Macdonald, who always beat me at squash but was equally consistent in providing extraordinary support and advice.

I have also benefited from comments, suggestions, criticisms, and advice from faculty from across the United States and beyond who have taken the time to provide comments or suggestions on portions of the research or on negotiating academia more broadly. Robert Art, Hal Brands, William Boettscher, Målfrid Braut Hegghammer, Matthew Bunn, Andrew Coe, Peter Feaver, Matthew Fuhrmann, Charlie Glaser, Ryan Grauer, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, Kelly Greenhill, David Holloway, Jacques Hymans, Peter Krause, Ron Krebs, Matthew Kroenig, Keir Lieber, Sean Lynn-Jones, Marty Malin, Alex Montgomery, Steve Miller, Rich Nielsen, Benoit Pelopidas, Roger Petersen, Sebastian Rosato, Joshua Rovner, Scott Sagan, Keith Shimko, Caitlin
Talmadge, Monica Toft, Lily Tsai, Stephen Van Evera, Anna-Mart Van Wyk, and Nicholas Wheeler all deserve thanks.

In addition to the MIT Political Science Department, the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School, the MIT Center for International Studies, the Tobin Project, and the Smith Richardson Foundation, have all provided invaluable and generous financial support at various points. The staff at these institutions, including Susan Twarog, Diana Gallagher, Joli Divon Saraf, Lynne Levine, Casey Johnson, Susan Lynch, Josh Anderson, and others, ensured that everything ran smoothly.

My fellow colleagues guiding MIT’s undergraduates (for better or worse) and living together in Maseeh Hall—especially Sebastian Schmidt, Becky Kjaerbye, Mitali Thakor, Sarah Moshary, Laura Stoppel, Matt Smith, Kim Davis, Sathya Silva, Robert Jones, Bianca Datta, Veronika Stelmakh, Yasmin Bijani, and Jason Hill—have provided entertainment; sounding boards for rants on a range of subjects; yoga, running, climbing, and dining partners; and much else.

Sarah’s love, commitment, and support throughout the process of writing this dissertation has been unyielding. She never wavered in her belief that I would finish (and succeed in getting an academic job) even when those outcomes felt very remote possibilities to me. She has tolerated my neuroses and obsessions with patience and grace, and her loyalty, compassion, and understanding have all made me a better person.

My deepest debts are those nearest to home. My family have been encouraging, inspiring, caring, and loving. My brother and sister have supported me even though I have been mostly absent and seen them far less than I would want over the last few years. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents. They have encouraged me unconditionally at every turn despite me being far further away from home than they would want. They inspired my love of learning and intellectual curiosity about the world, and are models of parenting. I am more grateful than they know for everything they have done for me and I will keep trying to make them proud. It seems deeply inadequate that I can only offer them my gratitude.
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The question and its importance

The acquisition of nuclear weapons is a revolutionary act in international politics. What happens to the foreign policy aspirations and practices of the states that acquire the most powerful weapons that mankind has yet devised? Does the acquisition of nuclear weapons embolden states to engage in more risky behaviors in the international system? Or does the security and reassurance provided by possessing a powerful deterrent against external aggression have the opposite effect, making states less belligerent and more peaceful? Alternatively, is the effect of nuclear weapons contingent on the circumstances in which a state finds itself, or other factors? These questions are the subject of this dissertation.

The answer to these questions have important consequences for policymakers. Devising policy responses or strategies for deterring new nuclear states hinges on understanding how they are likely to behave after acquiring nuclear weapons.¹ A proliferating state that is likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression likely demands different political and military strategies from the United States and broader international community than if nuclear acquisition is likely to make the state more peaceful. Similarly, determining the costs that the United States and others should be prepared to pay to prevent nuclear proliferation hinges on


19
correctly assessing how nuclear weapons affect the behavior of the states that acquire them and how dangerous those effects are. For example, if states typically expand their interests in world politics or act more belligerently in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, preventing nuclear acquisition should be a much higher priority than if nuclear weapons do not much affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them.2

These problems occupied the minds of U.S. policymakers throughout the Cold War, as states such as China, Israel, and South Africa acquired nuclear weapons. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Cold War, new nuclear powers have emerged and other states such as Iran have moved closer to joining the nuclear club. Looking forward, as U.S. relative power declines in the future, a more multipolar world order could encourage further states such as South Korea, Japan, Turkey, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, or Australia, to question the reliability of U.S. protection and consider acquiring their own independent nuclear weapons to improve their security. The question of how states behave when they acquire nuclear weapons is not, therefore, likely to disappear from the minds of policymakers in the near future.

Despite the importance of this problem, and the prominence that questions of nonproliferation policy have occupied within U.S. grand strategy, U.S. policymakers have frequently struggled to anticipate how a state acquiring nuclear weapons might behave.3 Instead, policymakers have often come to unclear or contradictory conclusions that provided little assistance to decisionmakers. For example, in 1963, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate attempted to assess the way in which China’s foreign policy would change if it acquired nuclear weapons.4 One paragraph offered a sanguine assessment, arguing that it was unlikely that “the acquisition of a limited nuclear weapons would produce major changes in Communist China’s foreign policy.” The very next paragraph, however, argued that nuclear weapons would affect Chinese

---


foreign policy in important ways, stating that: “the Chinese would feel very much stronger [if they acquired nuclear weapons] and this mood would doubtless be reflected in their approach to conflicts on their periphery...the tone of Chinese policy would probably become more assertive.” These contradictions did not go unnoticed: a footnote inserted by the Acting Director of Intelligence and Research declared that these two statements were “somewhat inconsistent” with each other.

For scholars, too, this question is of considerable importance. How states use nuclear weapons—weapons that are simultaneously enormously powerful but extremely rarely used directly—to achieve their goals in international politics is a fundamental question at the heart of scholarly debates about the importance of nuclear weapons in international politics and the broader meaning of the “nuclear revolution.” Kenneth Waltz opened his famous treatise on the benefits of proliferation with a question: “What will the spread of nuclear weapons do to the world?”

A comprehensive answer to this question requires understanding how states change their foreign policies when they get their nuclear weapons.

Despite its clear importance to policymakers and scholars, the question of how states change their foreign policy when they acquire nuclear weapons has been overlooked and understudied. Instead of asking how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them, scholars have tended to focus on different (though also important) questions: how nuclear weapons affect other outcomes such as the occurrence of conflict; how a state acquiring nuclear weapons affects the foreign policy calculations of other states; and how states with nuclear should conduct their foreign policy.

Some of these works do offer theoretical accounts of how nuclear weapons affect state foreign policy. Kenneth Waltz, for example, argued that “nuclear weapons make states more cautious.” However, these arguments tend to be general statements that argue that the effect of nuclear acquisition is the same for all states. However, when we look at the historical record, there is considerable variation in how states have changed their foreign policies after acquiring nuclear weapons. Among the first generation of proliferants, for example, the way

6. Ibid., 39.
in which the United States responded to having nuclear weapons was very different to the way in which Britain or France responded to nuclear acquisition. Similarly, in Asia, India, China, Pakistan, and North Korea appear to conceive of the utility of their nuclear weapons very differently and use them to facilitate different foreign policy behaviors. Hypotheses that nuclear weapons have a single effect across states cannot shed light on this variation in the ways in which different states have used nuclear weapons to facilitate different foreign policy behaviors. Similarly, a small literature on “nuclear emboldenment” does offer a partial theory of how nuclear acquisition affects foreign policy. However, this literature only seeks to explain when nuclear acquisition will lead to aggression—only one of the foreign policy behaviors that nuclear acquisition can facilitate—and thus provides an incomplete answer to the question of how states change their foreign policy when they get nuclear weapons.

Overall, therefore, existing scholarship has failed to provide an answer to—or even dedicated significant attention to studying—a question of considerable importance to policymakers and scholars alike. This dissertation aims to fill this gap.

1.2 Summary of the argument

This dissertation makes three contributions to our theoretical and empirical understanding of how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. First, the dissertation offers a more complete and discriminating typology for understanding the impact of nuclear weapons on foreign policy than existing work. In particular, I distinguish between six foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate. The behaviors are empirically observable, conceptually distinct, and collectively exhaustive. The typology therefore allows scholars and practitioners to move beyond catch-all terms such as “emboldenment” when thinking about how nuclear acquisition affects the foreign policy of the states that acquire them.

First, nuclear weapons may facilitate aggression. Aggression is defined as more belligerent pursuit of goals in pre-existing disputes or in pursuit of previously defined interests. Second,
nuclear weapons can reduce the costs of expansion. Expansion is defined as the widening of a state’s goals in international politics, leading to new interests, rather than more aggressive pursuit of existing interests. Third, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with independence, defined as taking actions that an ally either opposes or does not support the state taking. Fourth, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with bolstering. Bolstering is defined as taking actions to increase the strength of an existing alliance or alliance partner. Thus, while independence involves using nuclear weapons as a substitute for an alliance, bolstering involves using nuclear weapons to augment an alliance. Fifth, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with steadfastness. Steadfastness is defined as a reduced inclination to back down in disputes or in response to coercion, and an increased willingness to fight to defend the status quo. Finally, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with compromise. In contrast to aggression, which is defined as seeking more in pre-existing disputes, compromise is defined as accepting less in pre-existing disputes. Table 1.1 summarizes these behaviors.

While nuclear weapons may facilitate each of these behaviors, not all states use nuclear weapons to engage in greater levels of all six behaviors. The second contribution of the dissertation is therefore to offer a theory for why different states use nuclear acquisition to engage in different combinations of these six behaviors. I argue that states in different strategic environments have different priorities in international politics, and different combinations of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aggression</td>
<td>The more belligerent pursuit of goals in pre-existing disputes or previously defined interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Expansion</td>
<td>The widening of a state’s goals in international politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Independence</td>
<td>Taking actions that an ally either opposes or does not support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bolstering</td>
<td>Taking actions to increase the strength of an existing alliance or alliance partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. steadfastness</td>
<td>A reduced inclination to back down/an increased willingness to fight to defend the status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Compromise</td>
<td>Accepting less in pre-existing disputes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
behaviors are thus attractive to different states. A sequence of three variables characterizes the state's strategic environment and thus allows the theory to specify which combinations of behaviors states will use nuclear weapons to facilitate. These variables, therefore, condition the effect that nuclear weapons have on a state's foreign policy. These variables are (1) the presence of severe territorial threats or an ongoing war; (2) the presence of allies that provide for the state's security; and (3) whether the state is increasing in relative power. These variables can be measured in advance of nuclear acquisition, enabling the theory to make ex ante predictions for how a state's foreign policy will change after nuclear acquisition.

The theory is structured as a decision tree, as shown in Figure 1.1. I label the theory as "nuclear opportunism," because according to this view, states seek to use nuclear weapons in a pragmatic, political, and opportunistic way to improve their position in international politics. In short, states use nuclear weapons to help them achieve goals or solve problems in international politics that the state cares about, and they direct their nuclear weapons to purposes the state considers most important. And it is the strategic situation or circumstances in which a state finds itself that determines the particular goals and problems that it can most profitably direct nuclear weapons towards.

The variables appear in the decision tree in order of their priority: variables which most constrain the state's political priorities appear first. Thus, the first variable in the tree is whether the state faces severe territorial threats or is engaged in an ongoing war. This variable comes first because it represents the most binding security environment a state can face. States in this position have little room to maneuver: their political priority must be to improve their position against the source of the threat or in the war they are engaged in, and they therefore seek to use nuclear weapons for this purpose. As a result, such states tend to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness—two behaviors which directly improve the state's position against their adversary. Other behaviors are less appealing for states in this position. For example, independence from allies is unattractive because states facing serious threats need all the help they can get—including from allies. Similarly, bolstering allies is unattractive because such states must tend to their own security needs before trying to improve the security of their friends.
For states not facing such threats, the geopolitical environment in which they find themselves grants them greater latitude to pursue a wider range of goals. Such states are not forced to use their nuclear weapons exclusively to improve their position vis-à-vis a primary threat, and can therefore afford to use nuclear weapons to improve their position in international politics in other ways. The second and third variables describe how states in more permissive security environments respond to nuclear acquisition.

The second variable is whether the state has a senior ally that provides for its security. This variable comes second because senior allies often attempt to constrain the foreign policies of their clients. For states in this position, reducing their dependence on the senior ally is often desirable, and their relative security grants them the latitude to do so. For states not facing severe threats and with a senior ally, nuclear acquisition is therefore likely to lead to greater levels of independence.

Regardless of whether a state has a senior ally that provides for its security (i.e., regardless
of the value that the second variable takes), states in permissive security environments are able to do more with their nuclear weapons than simply pursue independence from a senior ally. A third variable conditions the additional ways in which states in permissive security environments are likely to change their foreign policies after acquiring nuclear weapons. The third variable measures how a state’s power position is likely to change over time. This variable comes last in the sequence because it does not measure immediate threats or constraints on the state’s behavior, but rather measures how the opportunities and challenges facing the state are likely to evolve over time. Rising states often look to expand their influence in international politics, and the latitude afforded by their relatively permissive security environment allows them to undertake this behavior. Such states are likely to want to use nuclear weapons to increase their reach and influence over other states and within the international system more broadly. For such states, using nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion will therefore likely be attractive. Using nuclear weapons to stand more firmly in defense of what it has and to bolster the state’s existing allies are also likely to be attractive, as the state seeks to widen its ability to project power and influence.

For states that are not facing severe threats and are either declining in relative power or on a stable power trajectory, expansion is less attractive than for rising powers. Expanding a state’s interests and alliances is unwise when a state does not have an increasing ability to support such activities. This is particularly true for declining states whose current interests and alliances will become increasingly hard to maintain as the state declines. The political priority for such states tends to be to maintain the state’s position. States in this position are unlikely to find expansion or aggression to be attractive or wise, but maintaining their position in international politics at lower cost is likely to be attractive. Nuclear weapons can allow states to hold onto what they have by facilitating both the bolstering of existing allies and steadfastness. States that do not face serious threats and are declining in power are therefore likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of existing allies and steadfastness in response to challenges.

The theory therefore offers a deeply political view of the way in which nuclear weapons affect foreign policy. Much existing literature views nuclear weapons as useful only for
deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others, or implies that nuclear weapons have a single effect across all states that acquire them. The theory of nuclear opportunism offers a different perspective. Nuclear weapons are tools that states can use to achieve political goals that they care about, and those political goals vary significantly across states. Nuclear weapons, on this view, do not transform the political preferences of states, but are instead used in service of those political preferences.

The third contribution of the dissertation is to test the theory empirically. I use longitudinal case studies of three cases: the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the United States. These cases are chosen because each represents a hard case for the theory for differing reasons; because of the availability of primary sources that provide evidence about the process and mechanisms through which nuclear weapons affected each state’s foreign policy; and because the predictions of the theory of nuclear opportunism differ from the predictions made by a series of alternative explanations. To enhance internal validity, I focus on within-case variation. I look for discontinuities in foreign policy behavior that occur at the point of nuclear acquisition, and use process tracing to assess whether nuclear weapons caused the changes observed. Each case study relies on primary documents drawn from multiple archives, and in the South African case also draws on interviews with retired military and political elites conducted during several months of fieldwork. In each case, I test the theory both on its own merits and against three alternative explanations. This is useful because even if the theory performs well in an absolute sense, it may nonetheless be of limited use if it performs worse than other plausible alternatives. Similarly, even if the theory performs badly in an absolute sense, if it explains the variation we observe better than any other explanation, it may still be useful.

The three alternative explanations draw from important strands of international relations research. The first alternative explanation is offered by Paul Kapur’s theory of “strategic pessimism.” Kapur argues that nuclear acquisition creates incentives for conventional aggression, but only for weak states with territorially revisionist preferences. According to this view, then, nuclear acquisition should facilitate aggression for weak, revisionist states only. All other states should not change their foreign policies substantially when they acquire nuclear weapons.

The second alternative explanation is offered by defensive realism and the standard theory of the nuclear revolution. According to defensive realists such as Kenneth Waltz, nuclear weapons are a fundamentally stabilizing force within international politics. On this view, nuclear weapons ought to reduce a state’s need for alliances or to engage in aggression, or expansion. Such behaviors, in the defensive realist worldview, are driven largely by insecurity. Instead, nuclear weapons should make a state more likely to engage in compromise, and may also lead to increases in steadfastness and independence. The third and final alternative explanation draws on the increasing power of norms of nuclear non-use. The existence of a nuclear taboo should be expected to reduce the circumstances under which nuclear use is credible. Because the effects of nuclear weapons on state foreign policy depend on the possibility that they might be used, the presence of a robust nuclear taboo should reduce the effects that nuclear weapons have on a state’s foreign policy. While the argument does not make determinate predictions for the precise behaviors we should observe upon acquisition by any given state, it does suggest that we should observe nuclear acquisition having increasingly small effects on state foreign policy over time.

In each case, I argue that the theory of nuclear opportunism outperforms the alternatives (though it does not perform perfectly).

Britain faced no serious territorial threats, had a senior ally that provided for its security (the United States), and was declining in relative power. As the theory of nuclear opportunism would suggest, Britain did not, therefore, use its nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, expansion, or compromise. Instead, Britain’s political priorities were to maintain the British position in the world and reduce its dependence on the United States. Britain, therefore, used nuclear weapons to bolster existing junior allies in Asia, the Middle East, and in Europe. After acquiring nuclear weapons, Britain also became more comfortable responding more steadfastly to challenges to its position, and paying less attention to the preferences of the United States (i.e., acting more independently) in a series of crises in the Middle East in which the British position was challenged.

10. See, for example, Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Similarly, I argue that South Africa's foreign policy changed in ways that are largely consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism. South Africa was engaged in a war in Angola (the Border War), and faced potential Soviet intervention, further Cuban intervention, and Angolan forces which threatened South African territory and amplified the internal threats South Africa faced. South Africa's political priority was to improve its position in the conflict, and responded to nuclear acquisition by becoming more aggressive in the Border War. Nuclear weapons facilitated this behavior by giving South Africa an extra source of leverage in preventing Soviet intervention in the conflict and thus granted South Africa greater ability to reduce the downside risks of aggressive behavior.

The theory of nuclear opportunism also performs fairly well in explaining U.S. behavior. Nuclear acquisition substantially affected U.S. foreign policy, but did so differently during World War II and in its aftermath. As a state fighting a brutal war in both Europe and the Pacific when it initiated the Manhattan Project to acquire nuclear weapons, the United States first used nuclear weapons to engage in direct aggression against the Japanese, as would be expected. However, there are also interesting ways in which U.S. nuclear weapons also facilitated compromise and independence from the Soviet Union during the final days of the war, which would not be anticipated by the theory. In the aftermath of World War II, the situation facing the United States changed significantly. The United States faced no serious threats or challenges to its military preponderance in the immediate postwar period, and was rising in power. The complexity of the immediate postwar world makes evaluating the predictions of the theory challenging. Nonetheless, I argue that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering allies, as well as behaviors that combined elements of steadfastness, expansion and aggression.

Overall, while the theory does not perform perfectly across the cases, the empirical evidence suggests that the theory of nuclear opportunism offers important insights into the way in which states change their foreign policy when they acquire nuclear weapons.
1.3 The structure of the dissertation

The body of the dissertation lays out the typology and theory in more detail, and then tests the theory using the three qualitative case studies.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on the consequences of nuclear proliferation, and argues that we lack both a typology of effects that nuclear weapons may have on a state’s foreign policy and a theory for why states use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of those variables. It then describes the typology of foreign policy behaviors, before laying out the theory of nuclear opportunism, and the alternative theories against which the theory of nuclear opportunism will be tested: defensive realism, S. Paul Kapur’s theory of strategic pessimism, and a norms-based explanation based on the increasing strength of the nuclear taboo. I conclude by describing and justifying my research design.

The three empirical chapters of the dissertation test the theory against the three case studies. Chapter 3 examines the British case; Chapter 4 examines South Africa, and Chapter 5 examines the case of the United States.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation. I offer an initial assessment of the external validity of the theory in other cases of nuclear acquisition, draw implications of the dissertation for theory and policy, and identify gaps and avenues for future research.
Chapter 2

Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy

How do nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them? This chapter offers a theory that allows us to understand the impact that nuclear weapons have on the foreign policies of the states that acquire them, and lays out an empirical strategy to test this theory against alternative explanations.1

The theory argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons can reduce the expected costs associated with a range of foreign policy behaviors. In particular, I focus on six foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons can facilitate—*independence*, *bolstering*, *aggression*, *expansion*, *steadfastness*, and *compromise*. When the cost of a particular behavior is reduced, that behavior becomes more attractive. Reducing the costs associated with these behaviors therefore creates incentives for states to engage in these behaviors upon nuclear acquisition.

However, not all states use nuclear weapons to facilitate all of these behaviors. The crux of the theory is that different states find different combinations of these behaviors attractive depending on the strategic circumstances in which the state finds itself. In particular, the nature of the threats the state faces, its position within its alliances, and whether it is increasing or decreasing in relative power all affect which of these behaviors the acquiring state finds attractive, and therefore which of these foreign policy behaviors the state will use nuclear weapons to facilitate. States incorporate nuclear weapons into the calculations they make

about what they can get (and what they can get away with) in international politics, and direct nuclear weapons to purposes that the state considers useful. I label my theory, and the view of nuclear weapons it implies, as “nuclear opportunism.” The theory emphasizes both that states seek to use their nuclear weapons to improve their position in international politics, and that the circumstances in which a state finds itself affect a state’s goals in international politics and, thus, determine the purposes to which nuclear weapons can most profitably be directed by the state.

This chapter describes the theory and empirical strategy adopted to test it. First, Section 2.1 demonstrates that we currently possess neither a conceptual typology that allows us to discriminate between different effects that nuclear weapons have on state foreign policy, nor a theory that would allow us to explain the variation in foreign policy responses to nuclear acquisition that we see in the historical record. Second, Section 2.2 lays out a typology of different foreign policy behaviors, and shows why nuclear weapons can reduce the costs associated with each of these behaviors. Third, Section 2.3 lays out the theory of nuclear opportunism, connecting a sequence of independent variables relating to the state’s position in the international system with the outcomes identified in Section 2.2. Finally, Section 2.4 lays out the strategy adopted to test the theory against the empirical record and three alternative explanations.

2.1 Existing theories

Given the vast volume of scholarship examining the effects of nuclear weapons and the impact of the “nuclear revolution,” the claim that we lack a sufficiently discriminating theory of the ways in which nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states who acquire them may strike readers as surprising. To demonstrate this claim, it is first important to be clear about the criteria that a theory of how nuclear weapons affect state foreign policy would have to meet.

I define foreign policy as the portion of grand strategy that deals with a state’s relationships with other states. If grand strategy is the collection of means and ends with which a state
attempts to achieve its goals in international politics, then foreign policy is the collection of means and ends with which a state pursues its goals with respect to a given other state. Foreign policy does not therefore simply refer to the day-to-day conduct of a nation’s diplomats, and is not the sole preserve of the organ of the state specifically tasked with conducting bilateral diplomacy (e.g. the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, or the U.S. State Department). The definition of foreign policy used throughout this dissertation includes a state’s goals with respect to other states, the strategies it uses to pursue them, and the resources it dedicates to pursuing them.

Importantly, foreign policy is defined at the level of the dyad, because state A may have a different foreign policy toward state B to the one it has with state C. Thus, a state has a foreign policy toward a particular other state, rather than having a single foreign policy writ large.

A theory of how nuclear weapons affect foreign policy, then, would make determinate predictions for how the foreign policy of state A towards state B would change if state A were to acquire nuclear weapons. To be intellectually satisfying, such a theory must be sufficiently flexible to allow for the possibility that the effects of nuclear weapons on foreign policy may vary depending on the particular attributes or circumstances of the state that acquires them. A theory that suggests that nuclear weapons have a consistent effect across all states (e.g., “nuclear weapons make all states more aggressive”) would be unable to account for important variation that we observe in the empirical record. For example, while nuclear acquisition does appear to have made Pakistan more aggressive, nuclear acquisition has not had the same effect on Indian foreign policy. Moreover, because foreign policy is defined at the dyad level, and

---


3. Technically, foreign policy is defined at the level of the directed dyad, since state A has a foreign policy toward state B, but state B may have a very different foreign policy toward state A.


because there is no \textit{a priori} reason to think that nuclear weapons will affect state A's foreign policy towards state B in the same way as nuclear weapons affect state A's relationship with state C, the theory must also be sufficiently flexible to allow nuclear weapons to affect a state's relationships with different states in different ways. A theory that predicted a consistent effect across a country's relationships with different other states (e.g., "nuclear weapons should make Britain more aggressive") would also be unable to account for important variation in the historical record. For example, as I discuss below in Chapter 3, the British acquisition of nuclear weapons affected its foreign policy towards the United States very differently to the way in which nuclear acquisition affected Britain's foreign policy towards Egypt.

Existing work has not provided us with a theory that would satisfy these criteria, for three main reasons. First, most literature on nuclear weapons has examined the effects of nuclear weapons on outcomes other than the foreign policy of the state that acquires them. In particular, an impressive body of theoretical and empirical work has examined the connections between nuclear weapons and interstate conflict occurrence, conflict trajectories, and conflict


outcomes. These works do often offer insights into, or theoretical accounts of how nuclear weapons affect state foreign policy. And, indeed, some of these works do make theoretical arguments linking nuclear weapons acquisition and particular foreign policy outcomes. For example, Waltz argues that "nuclear weapons make states more cautious," while Gartzke and Jo argue that "nuclear-capable nations are bound to increase their influence in international affairs." However, these arguments tend to be general statements that specify the effects of nuclear acquisition to be the same for all states. As discussed above, such claims are of limited use in shedding light on the variation in foreign policy responses to nuclear acquisition that we see in the historical record.

A second reason why existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined the effect of nuclear weapons on the foreign policies of the states who acquire them is that scholarship has tended to focus on how nuclear acquisition affects the calculations of other states. The most obvious example is the large literature on whether, and under what circumstances, nuclear weapons can deter other states. This literature examines whether other states are deterred from attacking the state that has acquired nuclear weapons. While of clear importance, this literature does not provide direct insight into how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policy of the acquiring state itself. For example, if nuclear weapons provide deterrent benefits, how do the states that acquire nuclear weapons respond to that additional security? Do they do so by behaving more or less aggressively, or acting more expansively in world politics? The literature on deterrence offers little guidance. Similarly, the literature on nuclear compellence examines


10. Many of these works are cited above, and include Huth and Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work"; Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe"; Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War"; Signorino and Tarar, "A Unified Theory and Test of Extended Immediate Deterrence"; Narang, "What Does It Take to Deter?"
whether nuclear weapons help compellence conditional on a compellent threat being made. This question also focuses on how other states respond to threats made by nuclear states, and largely ignores the question of whether nuclear states respond to the (possible) compellent benefits of nuclear weapons by altering their foreign policy—perhaps by making more frequent or demanding compellent threats than non-nuclear states. A final example is the literature on reactive proliferation, which generally concludes that nuclear proliferation in one state does not substantially raise the likelihood of proliferation in nearby states. Again, this literature provides insight into how a state acquiring nuclear weapons affects the calculations of other states, but not into how nuclear weapons affect the calculations of the acquiring state.

A third reason why scholarship on the connections between nuclear weapons and foreign policy has been underdeveloped is that the classic works on nuclear strategy and the impact of the nuclear revolution were developed during the Cold War. As a result, they share a strong emphasis both on understanding symmetric nuclear possession (as by the United States and Soviet Union); and on offering prescriptions or insights into how pairs of nuclear-armed states could or should conduct foreign policy, coercive diplomacy, and war against each other. Such works contributed enormously to scholars’ and policymakers’ understanding of nuclear weapons and strategy, and introduced critical concepts such as “limited war,” “mutually assured destruction,” “the stability-instability paradox,” and “damage limitation” into the strategic lexicon. Nonetheless, these works largely ignored how nuclear weapons affect a state’s interactions with non-nuclear states, and did not offer a theoretical explanation or empirical assessment of how nuclear-armed states did in fact conduct their foreign policy. Indeed, many

such works were critical of how nuclear-armed states did in fact behave, and argued that policymakers had failed to understand the true nature of the nuclear revolution.  

There is, however, one literature that does offer a partial theory of the impact of nuclear weapons on foreign policy. This is the literature on nuclear “emboldenment,” most convincingly articulated in the work of S. Paul Kapur. Kapur argues that conventional aggression should generally be expected when conventionally weak states with revisionist preferences acquire nuclear weapons, because nuclear weapons provide a shield behind which revisionist states can pursue long-held territorial or other ambitions with limited fear of retaliation. Pakistan provides the critical example of a state in this position (perhaps the only such state to have acquired nuclear weapons). However, Kapur’s work, although of great importance, does not offer a complete theory of how nuclear acquisition affects a state’s foreign policies. First, Kapur is explicit that we should only observe conventional aggression when weak, revisionist states acquire nuclear weapons, but is less clear about the outcomes we should observe when conventionally powerful or status quo states acquire nuclear weapons. Second, conventional aggression is not the only possible emboldening effect that nuclear weapons may have. Emboldenment encompasses a range of conceptually distinct phenomena that should not necessarily be expected to occur under the same circumstances. For example, the more aggressive pursuit of existing interests is conceptually distinct from a greater willingness to fight to maintain the status quo, but both might be considered “emboldening” effects.

We therefore remain in need of a more discriminating conceptual language or typology with which to categorize and describe varying foreign policy responses to nuclear acquisition. The development of typologies has been an important driver of theoretical progress in the study of international relations. In this case, a well-developed typology of the effects of nuclear

16. For a similar argument that emphasizes revisionism and conventional weakness in predicting potential Iranian nuclear emboldenment, see Kroenig, A Time To Attack, 133-135.
17. Colin Elman, “Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics,” International Organiza-
weapons on foreign policy would facilitate more comprehensive theorizing about the effects of nuclear weapons. In this way, "original concepts can push forward the underlying arena of inquiry." Developing a more discriminating typology of the ways in which nuclear weapons might affect state foreign policy would not just be useful for scholars. U.S. policymakers have also frequently failed to disaggregate the different behaviors that nuclear weapons might facilitate. Instead, policymakers throughout the nuclear age have often expressed broad and generic concerns about the potential emboldening effects of nuclear acquisition, but without thinking in detail about how and why nuclear weapons may incentivize certain behaviors, or examining the circumstances in which different effects are likely to be observed.

2.2 Effects of nuclear weapons

What, then, are the potential effects of nuclear weapons on the foreign policies of the states that acquire them? This section offers a typology of six conceptually distinct and empirically distinguishable foreign policy behaviors. I distinguish between "independence," "bolstering," "aggression," "expansion," "steadfastness," and "compromise" Some of these effects have previously been conflated under the catch-all term "emboldenment," while others are not typically thought of as emboldening effects. I show why nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with these behaviors. This does not imply that nuclear weapons make any particular behavior "cheap": many foreign policy behaviors will be extremely costly both before and after nuclear acquisition. Similarly, I do not assume that the expected costs of engaging in each of these behaviors will always be reduced by nuclear acquisition. Nonetheless, I show theoretically that nuclear weapons can reduce the cost of each of these behaviors. When the cost of a behavior is reduced, we should expect that that behavior would become more attractive to the state, and engaging in that behavior (or engaging in it to a greater degree)

would be incentivized. Thus, in the same way that offense-defense theory suggests that more aggressive behavior should generally be expected when conquest is perceived to be easier (or less costly), the foreign policy behaviors described below should also be expected to occur to a greater degree when they can be undertaken at lower cost.

2.2.1 Assumptions

In showing how nuclear weapons might theoretically be expected to alter the costs of engaging in particular foreign policy behaviors, I make three assumptions. These assumptions are useful in order to make the task of theorizing tractable, and because they provide reasonable approximations of reality.

The first assumption is that nuclear weapons affect a state’s foreign policy because they provide military capabilities that the state previously lacked: the ability to deliver enormous destruction at short notice and in a short time period against an adversary’s military assets and/or civilian populations with relatively little effort or cost. This assumption provides a baseline which permits theorizing about the expected effects of nuclear weapons, but it is important to be clear about its implications and potential limitations. For example, this assumption ignores (though it does not rule out) the possibility that nuclear weapons may affect foreign policy through other mechanisms. For example, nuclear weapons might have important psychological effects on leaders’ perceptions of their status in international politics. This assumption also implies that in the historically unprecedented event that a state could already perform every mission that nuclear weapons could perform (for example, with high yield conventional weapons), the addition of nuclear weapons to a state’s arsenal would

---

20. This argument is equivalent to the microeconomic concept of “risk compensation” that suggests that individuals may engage in more risk-taking behavior (for example, dangerous driving) when the costs of that risk-taking behavior are reduced (for example, by a law mandating seat-belt use). See Sam Peltzman, “The Effects of Automobile Safety Regulation,” Journal of Political Economy 83, no. 4 (1975): 677–725.


22. These factors are widely recognized to distinguish nuclear weapons from conventional weapons (and other non-conventional weapons such as biological or chemical weapons). See, for example, Schelling, Arms and Influence, 18–24; John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 128.

not alter its foreign policies. This assumption seems reasonable: while there may be other mechanisms through which nuclear weapons may affect foreign policy, to begin theorizing on the assumption that nuclear weapons matter because they are militarily powerful does not seem especially controversial.

Importantly, this assumption suggests that nuclear weapons should only begin to affect a state’s foreign policies at the point at which they can be deployed and used in the way the state anticipates using them. The technological requirements of this will depend on a state’s nuclear posture. For example, if a state envisions using nuclear weapons to catalyze superpower intervention on their behalf by conducting a nuclear test and unsheathing the state’s nuclear capabilities (as South Africa, for example, planned to), then nuclear weapons should begin to affect a state’s foreign policy at the point at which it can conduct a nuclear test. If a state anticipates using nuclear weapons to hit strategic targets in an adversary’s homeland (as Britain, for example, planned to), then nuclear weapons should begin to affect a state’s foreign policy at the point at which they can deliver nuclear weapons to that target. Thus, as would be intuitively expected, the point at which nuclear weapons will affect state calculations about foreign policy will occur at the point at which the nuclear weapons can be deployed and used in the way that the state intends to use them.

Second, I assume that nuclear weapons can be used, and that nuclear weapons would not affect a state’s foreign policy if there was no possibility they could be used. Indeed, the large literature on nuclear deterrence also relies on this assumption, because the deterrent power of nuclear weapons depends on the possibility that they might be used. While there are clearly circumstances in which the threat of deliberate nuclear use is not credible, and a range of historical, normative, strategic, or circumstantial factors may make a given nuclear threat credible or not, it seems reasonable to assume that any state with nuclear weapons can plausibly threaten to use them under at least some circumstances. Even in circumstances in

24. For more on the different ways that states have planned to use their nuclear weapons, and the technological requirements associated with different nuclear postures, see Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*. 25. To take one dramatic example, a pure “nuclear stick-up” whereby a state threatens the first use of nuclear weapons in exchange for some concession, is unlikely to be credible in most circumstances. However, states can credibly threaten the use of nuclear weapons under a range of circumstances in large part determined by their nuclear posture. For example, the asymmetric escalation posture makes nuclear use credible at a lower conflict threshold than either the catalytic or assured retaliation posture. ibid., ch. 2. It might be argued that the
which the threat of deliberate nuclear use is not credible, accidental or inadvertent nuclear use remains a possibility. 26

This seems a reasonable assumption: although there are clearly circumstances in which the threat of nuclear use is not credible, accidental or inadvertent nuclear use remains a possibility. 27 Indeed, the large literature on nuclear deterrence also relies on this assumption, because the deterrent power of nuclear weapons depends on the possibility that they might be used. While certain nuclear postures may make nuclear use credible at lower levels, and a range of historical, normative, or circumstantial factors may make a given nuclear threat credible or not, it seems reasonable to assume that any state with nuclear weapons can plausibly threaten to use them under at least some circumstances, in addition to the range of scenarios in which inadvertent nuclear use might occur. 28

Third, I assume that the states that acquire nuclear weapons seek to use their nuclear weapons to improve their ability to protect and pursue their interests in international politics. In other words, states are strategic actors that seek to gain benefits from the fact that they possess nuclear weapons. According to this assumption, then, states do not expend significant resources, risk preventive attacks, resist coercive diplomacy, suffer the pressures and sanctions of the international community, and spend many years in the effort to acquire nuclear weapons only to then ignore the potential benefits that nuclear weapons have for the state’s ability to

likelihood of deliberate use has decreased over time because of an increasingly robust nuclear taboo, although whether such a taboo exists remains debated. For example, see Tannenwald, The Nuclear Taboo; Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons,” American Political Science Review 107, no. 1 (2013): 188–206; Paul C. Avey, “Who’s Afraid of the Bomb? The Role of Nuclear Non-Use Norms in Confrontations between Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Opponents,” Security Studies 24, no. 4 (2015): 563–596. As discussed in Section 2.5, the possibility that a nuclear taboo might explain variation in state responses to nuclear acquisition is considered explicitly as one of the alternative explanations examined in this dissertation. 26

To take one dramatic example, a pure “nuclear stick-up” whereby a state threatens the first use of nuclear weapons in exchange for some concession, is unlikely to be credible in most circumstances. However, states can credibly threaten the use of nuclear weapons under a range of circumstances in large part determined by their nuclear posture. For example, the asymmetric escalation posture makes nuclear use credible at a lower conflict threshold than either the catalytic or assured retaliation posture. Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era, ch. 2.
protect and pursue its interests in world politics.\textsuperscript{29} This assumption might be justified with reference both to structural forces or to domestic politics. On the structural side, many theories of international politics view states as seeking to maximize their power, and would therefore be unsurprised that states seek to gain the maximum benefit from their nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{30} But equally, domestic political actors who have advocated for or invested in the nuclear program may have had to stake their political credibility on the claim that nuclear weapons would prove useful to the state. Such actors may then become trapped by such commitments and eager to ensure that nuclear weapons are indeed used to improve the state’s position as far as possible.\textsuperscript{31}

### 2.2.2 Mechanisms

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, through what mechanisms do the possession of nuclear weapons affect the costs of foreign policy behaviors? I argue that there are four clusters of interrelated mechanisms through which nuclear weapons affect the costs of foreign policy behaviors.

First, there are direct military mechanisms by which nuclear weapons affect the costs of particular foreign policy behaviors. For example, using nuclear weapons militarily to achieve a certain level of destruction will in most cases be much cheaper than achieving the same level of military destruction using conventional military means. Schelling was correct to say that "against defenseless people there is not much that nuclear weapons can do that cannot be done with an ice pick," but the key to the significance of nuclear weapons in international politics is


not *what* they can achieve, but the speed and efficiency with which they can achieve it: "nuclear weapons can do it quickly."\(^{32}\) The destructive efficiency that nuclear weapons offer is unique among military technologies, and they thus have the potential to reduce the costs of achieving a range of military goals, and thus reduce the costs of foreign policy behaviors that seek those goals.

Most states do not plan to use their nuclear weapons in a direct military sense, however. The second way in which nuclear weapons affect the cost of a state’s foreign policy behaviors is through *first order political mechanisms*: by affecting the calculations of states with which the nuclear state is interacting in its foreign policy. In situations where the threat of nuclear use is (or may be) credible, the possession of nuclear weapons grants states an ability to escalate (or threaten to escalate) a conflict or crisis to the nuclear level. This raises the expected costs of escalation for adversaries, because nuclear use may impose costs on their territory, population, or military capabilities beyond those that can be imposed using conventional forces. The relative cost for the nuclear-armed state, therefore, of engaging in foreign policy behaviors that may trigger escalatory responses, therefore, is reduced, because it is harder for adversaries to escalate in response. The same logic also applies even in situations in which the threat of nuclear use is not credible, because nuclear weapons may nonetheless make a state better able to outbid adversaries in a competition in risk-taking. As Schelling argues, states can exert coercive pressure on each other by making "threats that leave something to chance" even if deliberate nuclear use is not credible.\(^{33}\) Even if the threat of deliberate nuclear use is not credible in a given situation, for a state engaged in conflict with a nuclear-armed state, escalation can lead to situations in which nuclear weapons might nonetheless be used. Every act of escalation is therefore costlier (in expectation) against a nuclear-armed state than it would be if the state did not have nuclear weapons. For the nuclear-armed state, therefore, foreign policy behaviors that raise the risk of escalatory responses may have their expected costs reduced by nuclear possession because nuclear weapons make it harder for adversaries to escalate.

---

The third way in which nuclear weapons affect the cost of foreign policy behaviors is through second order political mechanisms: nuclear weapons may reduce the cost of certain foreign policy behaviors by affecting the calculations of actors not directly involved in the particular dyadic foreign policy interaction. For example, nuclear possession may deter diplomatic or military interventions by hostile third parties, or encourage similar interventions by friendly third parties. In this case, nuclear weapons may not affect the calculations of the state with whom the nuclear state is interacting in a given foreign policy, but nonetheless affect the costs associated with that foreign policy by influencing the calculations of other states.

Fourth, there are efficiency mechanisms by which nuclear weapons may affect foreign policy costs by freeing up resources or rendering the nuclear-armed state less reliant on others. By reducing the costs of certain foreign policy behaviors, nuclear weapons may free up resources to engage in other foreign policy behaviors that the state would not otherwise be able to afford. Thus, even if these behaviors are not directly affected by the costs of nuclear weapons themselves, they may nonetheless be facilitated by nuclear acquisition. Similarly, the capabilities offered by nuclear weapons may mean that the need to secure external political or military support from a third party is less pressing, increasing the state’s self-reliance and reducing the costs of foreign policy behaviors that risk jeopardizing that support.

These mechanisms are not unconnected to each other, and they all flow ultimately from the military characteristics of nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, it is helpful to lay them out explicitly, since they help in thinking through the kinds of foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons facilitate.

2.2.3 Typology of behaviors

I identify six foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate: aggression, expansion, independence, bolstering, steadfastness, and compromise. I argue that these behaviors are conceptually distinct, empirically distinguishable, and exhaustive.
Aggression

First, nuclear weapons may facilitate aggression. Aggression is defined as more belligerent pursuit of goals in pre-existing disputes or in pursuit of previously defined interests.

First, nuclear weapons may reduce the expected cost of aggression because a state may use nuclear weapons directly to engage in military operations that would be more costly to undertake with conventional forces (the military mechanism). Relatively few states consider using nuclear weapons directly to engage in aggression, however. More commonly, nuclear weapons facilitate aggression because nuclear weapons raise the risk of escalation for the state’s opponents, who must reckon with both the conventional forces the state previously possessed, and their nuclear capabilities (the first order political mechanism). This should make it harder for states to respond to the escalation of the nuclear-armed state, which should therefore find it easier to escalate their efforts to revise the status quo. Similarly, nuclear weapons may deter third parties from intervening to prevent the aggression of the nuclear-armed state (the second order political mechanism). Finally, nuclear weapons may facilitate this behavior because nuclear weapons may free up resources previously dedicated to other military contingencies, allowing a state to concentrate additional resources in revising a particular element of the status quo (the efficiency mechanism). Through all of these mechanisms, nuclear weapons can make opportunities to escalate a conflict or attempt to revise the status quo that had previously been too dangerous for the state to undertake more attractive.

Aggression might be identified by a range of behaviors, including: a) the issuance of new or more demanding compellent threats in an ongoing dispute; b) the dedication of larger conventional forces to missions associated with a particular dispute; c) more belligerent rhetoric being used by government officials and political leaders towards a particular country; d) the vertical escalation of a dispute through the use of new tactics, forces, military doctrines, or technologies; e) a greater tolerance for escalation and risk-taking behavior in an existing dispute. Aggression is a dyadic foreign policy behavior because it is directed at a specific other state or states: a state may engage in aggression toward one state while not engaging in aggression toward another.
Pakistan provides perhaps the clearest example of a state using nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. Scholars increasingly argue that nuclear weapons have acted as a shield behind which Pakistan has been able to pursue more aggressively its foreign policy goals in Kashmir and against India more broadly, most notably during the 1999 Kargil War and in the use of subconventional attacks against Indian cities. For example, Christine Fair argues that nuclear weapons “increase the cost of Indian action” against Pakistan, which facilitates “risk-seeking behavior as part of [Pakistan’s] effort to change the status quo.” South Africa also provides an example of a state using nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. As I discuss below in Chapter 4, fears regarding escalation placed substantial constraints on South African behavior in the frontline states (and particularly in Angola) during the mid to late 1970s. South Africa acquired nuclear weapons to provide an additional tool with which to control escalation and thus reduced the downside risks associated with aggression. As a result, South African tolerance for escalation in the Border Wars increased significantly once South Africa had acquired nuclear weapons, and South Africa became comfortable engaging in operations that had previously been considered too risky. Finally, had Iraq succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons, documentary evidence suggests that Saddam Hussein had at least considered using nuclear weapons to facilitate conventional aggression against Israel.

Expansion

Second, nuclear weapons can reduce the costs of expansion. While some scholars use the term expansion as more or less synonymous with aggression, I distinguish between the two. Expansion is defined as the widening of a state’s goals in international politics, leading to new interests, rather than the more aggressive pursuit of existing interests.

Nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with expansion in several ways. First, through the efficiency mechanism: nuclear weapons may allow states to free up conventional

35. Fair, Fighting to the End, 203.
military resources that had previously been dedicated to certain tasks that the state can now accomplish with nuclear weapons or by relying on nuclear deterrence. These freed up forces can then be redeployed in pursuit of new interests at lower risk than would have been possible without nuclear weapons. In addition, nuclear weapons may lower the costs associated with taking on new allies by making other states less willing to escalate conflicts against those allies now that they have a nuclear-armed patron, or by increasing the risks associating with resisting a state expanding its interests (the political mechanisms).

Identifying what constitutes a "new" interest of a state (and thus empirically distinguishing expansion from aggression) is not always easy because states have incentives to claim that the pursuit of new interests or the initiation of new alliances or rivalries are consistent with long-standing interests or goals. Nonetheless, actions indicative of expansion might include a state a) broadening its declared interests in world politics; b) forming alliances with, or offering extended deterrence to, new states; c) developing greater power projection capabilities; d) providing support for insurgents, proxies, or rebel groups in new countries; e) participating in disputes with states with whom the state has no previous history of conflict; f) taking a more active role in multilateral or international institutions. Thus, expansion is not itself a dyadic behavior. However, we can think of it as in large part composed of a series of dyadic foreign policy behaviors: most obviously, the formation of new alliance relationships with specific other states, and the initiation of new adversarial relationships with specific other states.

The United States provides an example of a state that was able to expand its interests in world politics in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons played a key role in the U.S. Cold War strategy to contain the Soviet Union, and nuclear weapons facilitated a semi-permanent military presence in Europe, allowed the United States to extend nuclear deterrence to a range of new allies, and thus permitted the United States to pursue a more expansive grand strategy than it had previously considered in its history. Similarly, after acquiring nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union did not appear to become more aggressive in Europe but did seem to expand its interests in Asia. The Soviet Union reversed its previously

38. While it may sometimes be challenging to empirically distinguish expansion from aggression, this does not affect the importance of the conceptual distinction between the two behaviors.

39. The role of nuclear weapons in facilitating post-war U.S. grand strategy is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
cautious attitude towards the Chinese revolution, signing an alliance treaty with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that included a commitment to assist China “by all means at its disposal,” a phrase that deliberately invoked the use of nuclear weapons. More dramatically, Stalin authorized the transfer of substantial military capabilities to the North Korean army, and ultimately approved Kim Il Sung’s attack on South Korea. More broadly, and consistent with the idea that states expand their interests after nuclear acquisition, quantitative research has found that states possessing nuclear weapons are on average more likely to initiate military disputes with countries with whom they have no history of conflict.

Independence

Third, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with a state acting independently of allies. Independence is defined as taking actions that an ally either opposes or does not support the state taking.

How might nuclear weapons affect the price of independence? First, through the efficiency mechanism of increasing the state’s self reliance. By providing an internal source of military power that the state previously lacked, nuclear weapons can provide a state with less need to rely on external sources of military power, i.e. alliances. The alliance therefore becomes somewhat less valuable than it previously was. As a result, the costs of acting independently of the ally, or in ways contrary to the wishes of the ally, are reduced because the ally’s support is no longer required to the degree it was prior to nuclear acquisition. Nuclear weapons can thus allow states to overcome “the dissatisfaction stemming from compromises of foreign policy autonomy necessary to retain [a] patron’s support.” Because states with nuclear weapons have less need for an ally’s protection, they should be less inclined to compromise their own

41. Bell and Miller, “Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict.”
42. While I use the language of “alliance,” this theoretical mechanism is not dependent on the alliance being formal or codified in any way: a state may implicitly provide for the security of another state, and the value of that security may be changed by nuclear acquisition, even if the relationship is not codified in an alliance.
43. This is not to say that the alliance becomes of no value to the state; indeed, it may still be extremely valuable for a range of reasons. It is just to say that its value is reduced upon nuclear acquisition.
goals in exchange for protection.

Importantly, independence may be observed in the state’s relationship with the ally from whom the state is increasingly independent. However, importantly, independence may also be observed in the state’s relationship with other states. Independence may go hand-in-hand with other dyadic behaviors identified by the typology, when those behaviors are at least partially constrained by the preferences of an ally. For example, nuclear acquisition may facilitate aggression both via the mechanisms identified above, or because a state previously refrained from aggression for fear of invoking the displeasure of an ally.

Actions indicating an increased independence from an ally might include: a) an increased willingness to criticize an ally; b) an increased willingness to co-operate with an adversary of an ally; c) an increased willingness to take actions opposed by the ally; d) a reduced inclination to inform an ally in advance of taking particular action; e) an increased willingness to take military actions in the absence of support from an ally; f) withdrawing from an alliance.

France provides an example of independence in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. France obtained nuclear weapons partly to reduce its dependence on the United States for its security. Upon acquiring a deliverable capability in 1964, France became more comfortable acting independently of the United States, for example in criticizing the Bretton Woods monetary system, pursuing détente with the Soviet Union, recognizing China and, most notably, by withdrawing from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s command structure.\(^4\)\(^5\) By the 1970s, French officials were even prepared to make provocative statements about their ability to harm the United States with its nuclear weapons, with General Guy Méry, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, stating that the “damage that we could cause to either superpower would immediately place it in such a situation of imbalance regarding the other superpower that it is doubtful that either could afford to tolerate suffering that damage at any time.”\(^4\)\(^6\) To take a second example, observers have argued that North Korean nuclear weapons have allowed Pyongyang to defy its Chinese patron at lower risk. Pollack argues that “the


desire to be answerable to no external power” was a key driver of the North Korean nuclear program, and that “North Korean leaders have concluded that its nascent nuclear weapons capabilities...inhibit the Chinese,” both in terms of controlling North Korean behavior, and in limiting its ability to jettison its ties with Pyongyang despite Chinese leaders becoming “increasingly perturbed” by North Korean behavior. To take a third example, I argue in Chapter 3 that Britain became more willing to respond to challenges to its position in the Middle East independently of the United States in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable capability in 1955. Before 1955, British responses to challenges to its position in the Middle East were characterized by dependence on the United States and a reliance on U.S. military and diplomatic support. However, in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition Britain became considerably more willing to use force unilaterally to restore or protect the status quo, including in cases where the United States either opposed or did not actively support British action, a tendency most dramatically demonstrated during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

**Bolstering**

Fourth, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with bolstering. Bolstering is defined as taking actions to increase the strength of an existing alliance or alliance partner. Thus, while independence involves using nuclear weapons as a substitute for an alliance, bolstering involves using nuclear weapons to augment an alliance.

Nuclear weapons can facilitate or reduce the costs associated with bolstering in several ways. First, through political mechanisms: nuclear weapons may offer a lower cost way to defend an alliance partner by making hostile third parties less inclined to challenge the alliance partner. Similarly, the process of acquiring nuclear weapons means that nuclear-armed states possess a range of nuclear technologies that it can choose to offer to an ally—increasing the ally’s strength (and capacity to acquire nuclear weapons of its own) in a way that is less

---


48. As in the discussion of independence, the alliance does not need to be formalized or codified. Nuclear weapons can facilitate the bolstering of another state even if that state is not a formal ally.
costly than to make an equivalent conventional commitment. For example, a state can transfer sensitive nuclear technologies to an ally as a way of strengthening it. Second, by using nuclear weapons for tasks that the state had previously relied on conventional forces, nuclear weapons may free up financial or conventional military resources which a state can use take on deeper alliance commitments (the efficiency mechanism).

Actions indicating bolstering might include a state: a) offering a firmer defense commitment than had previously been offered to an ally; b) stationing forces or weapons systems on the territory of the ally; c) institutionalizing or formalizing a previously informal co-operative relationship; d) providing additional resources to the state (including nuclear technologies). Bolstering is a dyadic foreign policy behavior because it is directed at a specific ally: a state may bolster a given ally but not bolster another.

A range of states have used nuclear weapons to bolster their allies. For example, China provided Pakistan with enough Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) to build several nuclear weapons, along with a nuclear weapon design, in order to bolster Pakistan against their common adversary, India.49 Indeed, research suggests that sensitive nuclear assistance is often undertaken to bolster friends against common enemies.50 Britain also provides an example of a state which used nuclear weapons to bolster its alliances. As discussed below in Chapter 3, upon acquiring a deliverable capability in 1955, Britain used its nuclear weapons to make commitments to allies in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe that it was increasingly unable to make credible with declining conventional forces.

**Steadfastness**

Fifth, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with steadfastness. Steadfastness is defined as a reduced inclination to back down in disputes or in response to coercion, and an increased willingness to fight to defend the status quo.

As with aggression, nuclear weapons can reduce the cost of this behavior through a range of mechanisms. Nuclear weapons facilitate steadfastness because nuclear weapons raise the

---

risk of escalation for the state's opponents, who must reckon with both the conventional forces the state previously possessed, and their nuclear capabilities (the first order political mechanism). Because other states find it harder to escalate against the nuclear-armed state, it should be easier for the nuclear-armed state to stand firm in defense of the status quo. Nuclear weapons may also deter potentially hostile third parties from joining in an attack against the nuclear-armed state, making it easier to stand up to threats it does face (the second order political mechanism). Finally, nuclear weapons may facilitate this behavior because nuclear weapons may free up resources previously dedicated to other contingencies, allowing a state to concentrate additional resources in defending the status quo (the efficiency mechanism). Through all of these mechanisms, nuclear weapons can allow states to stand more firmly in defense of the status quo.

Actions indicating steadfastness might include a state a) issuing more explicit deterrent threats to opponents; b) more quickly mobilizing forces in response to aggression; c) using more belligerent rhetoric during disputes and crises; d) responding to military provocations at higher rates. Steadfastness is a dyadic foreign policy behavior because it is directed at a particular source of threat: a state could be steadfast in response to threats emanating from one state, but fail to be steadfast in response to threats from another.

Pakistan provides an example of a state that found nuclear weapons allowed to stand firmer in defense of the status quo. For example, Pakistani elites viewed the various India-Pakistan crises of the 1980s as "validat[ing] Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's decision to acquire a nuclear weapons capability...[a] nuclear capability ensures defense against physical external aggression and coercion from adversaries, and deters infringement of national sovereignty," as well as providing Pakistan with the ability to draw the United States in to resolve Indo-Pakistani disputes should escalation rise to an intolerable level. Nuclear weapons have thus allowed Pakistan to tolerate higher levels of escalation in disputes with India, and thus to stand more firmly in defense of what it perceived to be the status quo in the face of Indian provocations. To take another example, Britain also experienced increased steadfastness in the aftermath of

acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955. Chapter 3 argues that after 1955 Britain responded to challenges to its position in the Middle East more forcefully but without seeking to acquire resources beyond the pre-existing status quo division. For example, while Britain was forced to acquiesce to the Saudi occupation of Buraimi in 1952, Britain unilaterally and forcibly restored the status quo in Buraimi in 1955.

Compromise

Finally, nuclear weapons may reduce the costs associated with compromise. In contrast to aggression, which is defined as seeking more in pre-existing disputes, compromise is defined as accepting less in pre-existing disputes.

Nuclear weapons may reduce the cost of compromising in disputes through several of the mechanisms above. First, through political mechanisms: because nuclear weapons raise the costs associated with adversaries challenging the state, nuclear weapons reduce the security risks that the state faces, and thus mean that a state may face lower risks if it makes compromises. For example, if nuclear weapons make conventional aggression against the state less likely, then they also reduce the value of strategic depth and therefore reduce the value of holding territory. The risks associated with making territorial compromises are therefore lower. Nuclear weapons may also facilitate compromise through the efficiency mechanism: nuclear weapons may free up military or financial resources which a state can use to directly mitigate the security risks—and thus reduce the costs—associated with making compromises.

Compromise might be identified by a range of behaviors, including: a) the dedication of fewer or less offensively postured conventional forces to missions associated with a particular dispute; b) less belligerent rhetoric being used by government officials and political leaders towards a particular country; c) the initiation of negotiations or issuance of less onerous demands in a given dispute; d) the settling of territorial disputes through negotiation. Compromise is a dyadic foreign policy behavior because it is directed at a particular other state: a state could make compromises with one state while not pursuing compromise with another state.

It is unclear whether any state has ever behaved in this way in response to nuclear acquisition. One possible case is that Soviet “New Thinking,” and the associated withdrawal from
Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, and Africa, was the result of a belated recognition of the reduced benefits of controlling territory in the nuclear age. However, the role of nuclear weapons in this case is contested, and even advocates of this view acknowledge a wide range of other factors played into Soviet thinking.\textsuperscript{52} However, regardless of whether states have responded to nuclear acquisition in this way, scholars have frequently argued that states \textit{should} behave in this way. For example, Shai Feldman argues that Israel should respond to nuclear acquisition by being more willing to make territorial compromise with its neighbors.\textsuperscript{53}

\subsection*{2.2.4 Is the typology exhaustive?}

Importantly, these six behaviors are not mutually exclusive because a state may use nuclear weapons to facilitate more than one of these behaviors. Similarly, because of the dyadic nature of foreign policy, a state may use nuclear weapons to facilitate different behaviors toward different states. For example, I argue in Chapter 3 that after acquiring nuclear weapons Britain became more independent from the United States, bolstered its alliances with existing junior allies, and was more steadfast in responding to challenges to the status quo from a range of sources. This typology therefore addresses the problem identified above in that it allows for state responses to nuclear acquisition to vary both between states and across an individual state’s foreign policies toward different states.

However, is the typology exhaustive? Does it capture the full range of security-related foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate? By laying out the behaviors on two dimensions, I suggest that we can have reasonable confidence that these six behaviors cover the full range of foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate. Table 2.1 shows how these behaviors are positioned on these two dimensions.

The first dimension is whether the state that the foreign policy behavior is directed at is one with the whom the state currently has a primarily adversarial relationship, a primarily cooperative relationship, or a limited, neutral, or non-existent relationship. Some of the behaviors

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
Table 2.1: The dimensions underlying the typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existing relationship</th>
<th>Intensify</th>
<th>Aim of behavior</th>
<th>Reduce intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-operative</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversarial</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

identified above are aimed at allies or friendly states (bolstering and independence), others are aimed at adversaries or rivals (aggression, steadfastness, compromise), and others are aimed at states with whom the state does not currently have a strong relationship (expansion). The second dimension is the way in which the behavior seeks to alter the dyadic relationship. At one end of the spectrum, the state may seek to increase what it seeks from the relationship, or to intensify the relationship. For example, bolstering aims to augment or intensify a relationship with an ally; aggression aims to seek more in a relationship with an adversary; while expansion aims to intensify currently neutral relationships (either by initiating new alliances, or conflicts with new states). At the other end of the spectrum, the state may seek to reduce the intensity of a given dyadic relationship. For example, independence aims at extracting the state from the constraints of an alliance relationship, while compromise aims to reduce the intensity of an adversarial relationship. Because a state cannot reduce the intensity of a limited or neutral relationship, the bottom right section of Table 2.1 is empty.

The typology therefore appears to cover the entirety of the conceptual space defined by these two dimensions. Of course, the typology could potentially be altered in various ways. For example, one could change the dimensions used to classify the behaviors, or alter the behaviors identified by collapsing or further disaggregating some of the cells in Table 2.1. Nonetheless, the typology represents the entirety of the conceptual space identified and can thus be reasonably considered exhaustive.

---

2.2.5 Behaviors and goals

It is worth clarifying that the typology identifies behaviors rather than the goals that those behaviors might serve, or that a state might be aiming to achieve by engaging in the behavior. This is important as a matter of measurement—foreign policy behaviors are far easier to observe than the goals or motivations underlying them. For example, the typology avoids the need for difficult assessments of whether a state is ultimately security seeking or revisionist in order to identify whether it is engaging in aggression. The typology distinguishes between different behaviors, and is agnostic about the goals that states may ultimately have in pursuing those behaviors. Nonetheless, this is worth emphasizing because the language of the typology has the potential to cause confusion: for example, a state may engage in aggression but nonetheless ultimately have status quo preferences (i.e., the state may not have what might be called “aggressive” preferences or goals). Equally, a state may engage in expansion or bolstering for “aggressive” reasons, but not engage in the behavior that I label as “aggression.”

2.3 Theory: Nuclear opportunism and the primacy of politics

Each of these six foreign policy behaviors, then, may be facilitated by nuclear acquisition. However, although nuclear weapons may reduce the costs of engaging in these behaviors, not all states use nuclear weapons to facilitate all of these behaviors. What explains why some states find some of these foreign policy behaviors attractive but not others? This section lays out a theory that connects a series of variables to the foreign policy behaviors that the state is likely to find attractive, and thus use nuclear weapons to facilitate. These variables, therefore, condition the effects of nuclear acquisition.

As discussed, nuclear weapons reduce the costs associated with a range of different foreign policy behaviors. A reduction in the cost associated with a behavior should be expected to make that behavior more attractive to a state. Given the assumption that states seek to gain political benefits from possessing nuclear weapons, we should expect to see states using

---

55. It is a basic insight from microeconomics (the “law of demand”) that when the cost of something drops, an actor’s consumption of that good increases.
their nuclear capacity to engage in these behaviors in an effort to improve their position in international politics. Nonetheless, different states will find some of the above behaviors more attractive than others, because different states have different political priorities. As a result, some states will be more eager to take advantage of the lower cost of engaging in certain behaviors than others.

I argue that different states find different combinations of these behaviors attractive because they have different political priorities. Those political priorities, in turn, are to a significant degree driven by the strategic circumstances in which the state finds itself. The theory is therefore structured around a sequence of three variables that describe the state's position in the international system. These variables are then used to predict the state's preferences over the six different behaviors. These preferences then lead states to seek to take advantage of the lower costs associated with different behaviors when they acquire nuclear weapons. In short, these variables condition the effect that nuclear weapons have on a state's foreign policy.

The three variables describe the position of the state in the international system, and are sequenced in order of priority: variables which most constrain the state's political priorities and most dominate a state's strategic thinking appear first. This is because we would expect states to use nuclear weapons to address the most immediate problems they face rather than lower priorities. The first variable—the existence of serious territorial threats—identifies perhaps the most imminent and grave security threat a state can face in international politics. The second variable—the existence of a senior ally that provides (at least in part) for the state's security—describes a condition that is not necessarily threatening to a state's security but which may nonetheless constrain the state's behavior. The final variable—whether a state is increasing or decreasing in relative power—does not describe an immediate constraint on the state's ability to conduct its foreign policy but provides a measure of how the opportunities and constraints that the state faces in the international system are likely to evolve over time.

I label this theory, and the view of nuclear weapons that it implies, as "nuclear opportunism." According to this view, states seek to use nuclear weapons in a political, pragmatic, and opportunistic way to improve their position in international politics, to help them achieve goals or solve problems in international politics that the state cares about, and they direct their
nuclear weapons to purposes the state considers useful.\textsuperscript{56} The theory therefore offers a deeply political view of the way in which nuclear weapons affect foreign policy. Nuclear weapons are tools that states can use to achieve political goals that they care about, and those political goals vary significantly across states. Nuclear weapons, on this view, do not transform the political preferences of states, but are instead used in service of the state’s political preferences.

A further point to note is that this theory is \textit{not} a theory of nuclear acquisition.\textsuperscript{57} The theory laid out here specifies what a state is likely to use nuclear weapons to try and accomplish, conditional on having made the decision to acquire nuclear weapons. In other words, the theory specifies what benefits a state is likely to seek from its nuclear weapons, once the state has concluded that the benefits of nuclear acquisition outweigh the costs. The theory does not have much to say about why some states will conclude that the benefits of nuclear acquisition outweigh the costs, or indeed, what those costs might be, and thus does not make predictions for which states will acquire nuclear weapons. Instead, it seeks to explain why those states that do acquire nuclear weapons behave in particular ways after having done so.

Figure 2.1 shows the predictions of the theory and the different combinations of variables that result in different predictions for changes in behavior following nuclear acquisition. The following sections describe these variables, the predictions made, and the logic underpinning those predictions, in more detail.

2.3.1 Variable 1: Serious territorial threat or ongoing war

The first variable that determines a state’s preferences over the various foreign policy behaviors described above is whether or not the state faces a serious territorial threat or is engaged in an

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{56} This label also mirrors the theory of “technological opportunism” offered by Keir Lieber, whose argument similarly emphasizes the primacy of politics in conditioning the effects of technological change on international politics. Keir A. Lieber, \textit{War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics Over Technology} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

ongoing war.\textsuperscript{58}

This variable comes first in the sequence because it identifies the most serious security environment that a state can face. States facing such threats or engaged in an ongoing war find themselves in a particularly challenging security environment that affords them little room for maneuver: the values the other variables further down in the sequence take thus do not influence the predictions made. For such states, addressing the source of threat or improving their position in the war they are fighting is their primary political priority, and states are therefore likely to direct their nuclear weapons to foreign policies that serve that purpose.

For states in such a precarious environment, many of the behaviors identified in the typology

\textsuperscript{58} How this variable is measured and operationalized is discussed in detail below.
are unattractive. For example, pursuing independence is therefore typically unattractive for such states. States in dire security environments are eager to accept assistance from other states, and do not wish to jeopardize their relationships with allies who may be able to help improve their security if at all possible. Similarly, expansion and bolstering are unattractive for such states, because a state facing serious threats on its border has little latitude to engage in such behaviors. States facing serious threats do not typically seek to gain new interests in international politics, or shore up the security of other states, because improving their own security against the source of threat must take priority. For example, Pakistan faces a conventionally superior threat from India, a hostile neighbor that dismembered its territory in the 1972 war. Pursuing independence from its allies such as China, or expanding its interests in South Asia or beyond, are impractical and unattractive goals even with nuclear weapons because of Pakistan’s need to focus on the Indian threat and because of its need for assistance from any and all sources. Instead, Pakistan has little choice but to use its nuclear weapons exclusively to improve its security concerns vis-à-vis India.

While expansion, independence, and bolstering are unattractive for such states, aggression and steadfastness are more attractive. For states facing severe territorial threats or engaged in war, the ability to tolerate higher levels of escalation in their dealings with the sources of threat and control the risks associated with higher levels of escalation, is desirable because it allows them to better confront the threat. Such states would generally like to be able to be able to more easily hold onto what they have against the threats they face and would also like to be able to improve their position against the threat to the greatest extent possible. For such states, both aggression and steadfastness towards the source of threat are, therefore, more attractive than the other foreign policy behaviors. States facing serious territorial threats or engaged in an ongoing war are therefore likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate these behaviors. This leads to Hypothesis 1, and the theoretical pathway identified in Figure 2.2.

H1: States facing serious territorial threats or involved in an ongoing war will use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness towards the source of threat upon nuclear acquisition, but will not use nuclear weapons to facilitate
expansion, bolstering, independence, or compromise.

Figure 2.2: Hypothesis 1: States facing serious territorial threats or engaged in war

1. State faces serious territorial threat/ongoing war? → Yes → Aggression & Steadfastness towards threat

It is worth noting that the nuclear status of the source of threat does not affect the predictions. If a state faces serious territorial threats or is involved in an ongoing war, then nuclear acquisition reduces the cost of steadfastness and aggression regardless of the nuclear status of the opponent. Whether or not the source of threat possesses nuclear weapons, nuclear acquisition raises the level of escalation that the state is willing to tolerate (either in defense of the status quo or in pursuit of revisionist goals) relative to not having nuclear weapons. For example, Pakistan would find improving its ability to engage in aggression and steadfastness towards India attractive, and would find that nuclear weapons reduced the cost of doing so, whether or not India possessed nuclear weapons. In short, when facing a severe territorial threat, having nuclear weapons allows a state greater freedom to engage in aggression and steadfastness than not having nuclear weapons, regardless of whether the state posing the threat itself has nuclear weapons.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that states facing severe territorial threats or involved in an ongoing war are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate both aggression and steadfastness. That is to say, Hypothesis 1 anticipates that states would seek to use nuclear weapons both to stand firmer when challenged, and find opportunities to revise the status quo in their favor more attractive. It does not, however, indicate which is likely to be the more obvious or dramatic effect: the precise balance between aggression and steadfastness that should be observed will likely depend on a range of factors. While I do not explicitly incorporate these variables into the theory or predictions in order to maintain the parsimony of the theory, it is worth briefly mentioning them. First, the greater the proximity of the threat, the more aggression will be incentivized relative to steadfastness because projecting power against a nearby threat is easier.
than against distant adversaries, and because escalation to the nuclear level is more credible against nearby targets.\(^{59}\) In addition, for states facing a favorable conventional balance of power, high levels of steadfastness should already be feasible, and so nuclear acquisition is unlikely to lead to as dramatic an increase in steadfastness for such states. Third, greater levels of revisionist preferences within the state are also likely to lead to greater aggression upon nuclear acquisition.\(^{60}\) Such states are by definition dissatisfied with the status quo, and are therefore particularly likely to see nuclear weapons as useful tools for adjusting the status quo in their favor. Fourth, states with a number of plausible potential proliferants in their region may be less likely to engage in greater levels of aggression in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, for fear of triggering nuclear domino effects that might worsen their overall security environment.\(^{61}\)

All of these factors should be expected to affect the relative balance between aggression and steadfastness that states are likely to find politically attractive—and will thus use nuclear weapons to facilitate—but do not alter the overall prediction.

### 2.3.2 Variable 2: Presence of a senior ally

For states not facing serious territorial threats, the security environment they face is less constricting. Such states are not forced to use their nuclear weapons exclusively to improve their position vis-à-vis a primary threat, and can, as a result, afford to use nuclear weapons to improve their position in international politics in other ways. The second and third variables describe how states in more permissive security environments respond to nuclear acquisition.

The second variable in the sequence is whether the state acquiring nuclear weapons has a senior alliance partner that helps provide for the state’s defense. States whose security is partly provided for by a senior ally are constrained if they wish to engage in behaviors that the senior ally opposes or does not support. Because the senior alliance partner plays a role in providing for the security of the junior state, the junior state must be cautious of acting in ways

---

59. Proximity raises the risk (and thus credibility) of nuclear escalation because warning times are lower, the likelihood of conventional and nuclear forces interacting are higher, and because it is more likely that each side is simultaneously threatening vital interests of the other. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*.

60. Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent*.

61. Miller, “Nuclear Dominoes.”

---

62
that might displease the senior state. The support of an ally is always somewhat suspect, because states can never know the intentions of their allies with certainty. As a result, few states can act contrary to the interests of the senior alliance partner without at least worrying about potential reductions in the support the ally provides. This imposes constraints on the behavior of the junior partner, because no two states have identical interests and the interests of most alliance partners diverge significantly on at least some issues at some times.

The constraints imposed by dependence on a senior ally mean that states which such allies not facing grave and immediate security threats are likely to be eager to increase their ability to act independently of their senior ally and will therefore use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence. As Goldstein argues, “those able to become more self-reliant often make the costly effort [to do so]...deference to a security patron is likely to be politically unattractive for the leaders of sovereign states.” States can never truly know if an ally will come to their aid, and prefer to provide for their own security if possible. Nuclear weapons offer such a source of military power (and thus security) that is entirely within a state’s own control. As a result, and as discussed above, nuclear weapons offer states the ability to reduce the costs of independence because they can serve as a partial substitute for the alliance. We should, therefore, expect to see these states having fewer compunctions about criticizing or failing to support the ally, acting in ways contrary to the ally’s interests, or even withdrawing from the alliance altogether upon acquiring nuclear weapons.

For states without senior allies providing for their protection, or which have only loose relations with more powerful states, independence is less attractive. Such states are not constrained from acting independently because there is no senior ally providing security that the junior state fears losing. Similarly, it is only states with senior allies that should be expected to find independence particularly attractive and use their nuclear weapons to facilitate independence. Junior allies are not typically able to constrain a state’s behavior because the junior ally is more reliant on the senior state than vice versa, and the senior ally should therefore
already be able to behave independently of the junior ally, should it so wish. Such states are therefore unlikely to use their nuclear weapons to facilitate independence. Similarly, the nuclear status of the senior ally does not affect whether or not nuclear weapons create incentives for the junior state when it acquires nuclear weapons. While senior allies will sometimes (perhaps often) possess nuclear weapons because, as discussed below, nuclear weapons can create incentives for powerful states to bolster their junior allies, nuclear weapons can create incentives for independence from senior allies whether or not the senior ally possesses nuclear weapons. It is the fact that the junior state fears losing the benefits provided by the senior ally that creates the high cost of independence in the absence of nuclear weapons. Nuclear acquisition reduces the importance of those benefits, making independence less costly. These preferences and cost reductions exist regardless of the nuclear status of the senior ally. This therefore leads to Hypothesis 2, identified in Figure 2.3.

H2: States not facing serious territorial threats or engaged in an ongoing war but with senior allies that provide for their security should use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence from those allies upon acquiring nuclear weapons.

Figure 2.3: Hypothesis 2: States not facing serious territorial threats but with senior allies
2.3.3 Variable 3: Power trajectory

As discussed, for states neither facing serious territorial threats on their borders nor involved in an ongoing war, the security environment in which they find themselves is more permissive. While such states may be involved in rivalries with other states, they do not face a severe threat to their territory and are not involved in an ongoing war. As a result, addressing an immediate threat is not an overriding and all-encompassing priority for such states as it is for states facing serious territorial threats. Regardless of whether a state has a senior ally that provides for its security (i.e., regardless of the value that the second variable takes), states in permissive security environments are able to do more with their nuclear weapons than simply pursue independence from a senior ally. A third variable conditions the additional benefits that states in permissive security environments seek to gain from their nuclear weapons. The third variable measures how a state’s power position is likely to change over time. This variable comes last in the sequence because it does not measure immediate threats or constraints on the state’s behavior, but rather measures how the opportunities and challenges facing the state are likely to evolve over time.

States rising in power often look to expand their influence in international politics, and the latitude afforded by their relatively permissive security environment allows them to undertake this behavior. International relations theorists have long recognized this behavior. As Karl Deutsch argued in 1968, as a state becomes relatively more powerful, “the more its leaders, elites, and often its population increase their levels of aspirations in international affairs.”  
Fareed Zakaria states that “nations try to expand their political interests abroad when central decision-makers perceive a relative increase in state power.” And Robert Jervis argues that “states’ definition of their interests tend to expand as their power does. It then becomes worth pursuing a whole host of objectives that were out of reach when the state’s security was in doubt and all efforts had to be directed to primary objectives.” Such states are likely to want to use nuclear weapons to increase their reach and influence over other states and within the

international system more broadly. For such states, the use of nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion will be an attractive option. Using nuclear weapons to bolster the state's existing allies and increase the power of the alliance networks of which it is part is also likely to be attractive, as the state seeks to widen its ability to project power and influence. Finally, such states are also likely to find steadfastness attractive. Nonetheless, the state's highly favorable geopolitical position (rising in power and facing no serious territorial threats) means that states in this position may have their interests challenged relatively rarely. This means that observing any change in steadfastness may be more challenging in these cases.

Do such states also find aggression attractive in addition to expansion and the bolstering of junior allies? It is certainly possible that rising states will seek to pursue existing adversarial relationships more aggressively when they acquire nuclear weapons. However, I argue that, in general, using nuclear weapons to pursue expansion is likely to be the more attractive option for rising states not facing severe threats on the border. First, any threats that such states face are by definition not so immediate that they require the state's full attention. Rising states can afford to be patient in dealing with such threats because time is on their side and the power trajectories are in their favor: because they are increasing in power any existing threats or rivalries are likely to become more easily dealt with over time. Second, rising states need to be careful as they increase their power not to give potential rivals too much cause to band together to oppose them. Existing opponents of the state are likely to be particularly sensitive to any effort by the rising state to aggress against it. For rising states, it may, therefore, be more trouble than it is worth to engage in aggression. By contrast, expansion can often be undertaken consensually and with less risk of triggering balancing coalitions. Forming new alliances, or bringing new junior allies under the state's wing, for example, both constitute expansion, but are less likely to trigger opposition than aggression. For these reasons, I anticipate that rising states not facing severe threats will generally be more likely to engage in expansion rather than aggression.

Do states not facing serious threats and rising in power also find steadfastness attractive? I argue that such states do find steadfastness attractive (and seek to use nuclear weapons to

facilitate this behavior. Nonetheless, the state's highly favorable geopolitical position (rising in power and facing no serious territorial threats) means that these states may find their position challenged relatively rarely. The rareness with which such states are likely to have their interests challenged means that observing any change in steadfastness may sometimes be challenging.

As a result, these predictions lead to Hypothesis 3, and the pathway identified in Figure 2.4.

H3: States that are not facing serious territorial threats or involved in an ongoing war and rising in relative power will use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of existing junior allies, steadfastness, and expansion upon nuclear acquisition.

Figure 2.4: Hypothesis 3: Rising powers not facing serious territorial threats

What are the predictions if a state is not increasing in relative power? These states face limited threats but lack the increase in material capabilities that might encourage more vigorous foreign policies, and are therefore are the most status quo states. I therefore argue that an
important political priority is to maintain the state’s position. Expansion and aggression are therefore relatively unattractive for such states. Expanding a state’s interests and alliances is unwise when a state does not have an increasing ability to support such activities, and trying to acquire more in ongoing disputes is unlikely to be attractive because the state does not face severe threats and holding onto what the state has is likely to prove sufficiently challenging over time. This is particularly true for states that are actively declining in relative power, since even their current interests and alliances will become increasingly hard to maintain as the state declines. States in this position are therefore unlikely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion or aggression.

States that are reasonably secure and not rising in power may not find expansion to be attractive or wise, but bolstering and steadfastness are both attractive. Such states are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate both of these behaviors. Bolstering the state’s alliances is attractive because alliances help the state to maintain their position in international politics even in the face of relative power decline, and nuclear weapons can allow a state to facilitate this behavior. However, this prediction only applies to the acquiring state’s relationships with its junior allies. As previously discussed, independence is still incentivized for the acquiring state’s relationships with its senior allies. Even for declining states, senior allies can be a constraint on their foreign policy, and nuclear acquisition thus makes independence from the senior ally politically attractive. Similarly, steadfastness is attractive for such states. As discussed above, expansion and aggression are less likely to be attractive to states that are not rising in power, but such states—including declining powers—would generally like to hold on to what they have. Because maintaining their position remains a goal for such states, being able to stand more firmly in defense of the status quo is unsurprisingly attractive, and such states are likely to use nuclear weapons for this purpose.

70. An alternative argument would be that declining states are particularly likely to engage in aggression because their ability to do so in the future will be even lower and the state therefore faces a window of opportunity in which to act to revise the status quo. For arguments of this sort, see Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954,” International Security 13, no. 3 (1988): 5-49; Stephen Van Evera, Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). While such theoretical logics may operate for states facing severe threats, I find it less persuasive for declining states in reasonably secure environments. Ultimately, however, this judgment can be assessed empirically—if my theoretical bet is incorrect, the theory will do a worse job in explaining the cases.
These predictions lead to Hypothesis 4, identified in Figure 2.5.

H4: States that are not facing severe territorial threats or involved in an ongoing war, and are not rising in relative power will use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness towards rivals and bolstering of junior alliance partners.

Figure 2.5: Hypothesis 4: States not rising in power and not facing serious territorial threats

The theory of nuclear opportunism therefore makes determinate predictions for how different states will use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of foreign policy behaviors. Nonetheless, the theory remains parsimonious, only using three binary variables to make predictions. Of course, this is a simplification of the complex and probabilistic interactions between a range of international and domestic variables that likely govern a state’s
response to nuclear acquisition in reality. Nonetheless, parsimony has two significant virtues in this context. First, it facilitates the goal of theory testing. It is far easier to assess whether a theory outperforms its competitors if that theory is clear and parsimonious and relies on measuring just a few variables. Second, given the small number of states to have acquired nuclear weapons, adding additional variables to the theory quickly becomes problematic, leading to the problem of “more inferences than observations.” The theory therefore offers a good middle ground by being both flexible enough to explain a wide range of state responses to nuclear acquisition but nonetheless sufficiently parsimonious to allow the theory to be tested empirically.

2.4 Empirical strategy

How should we best examine the validity of this theory? I test the theory using a series of qualitative case studies. In each case, the goal is to examine the state’s foreign policy in the period immediately before and after the acquisition of the relevant nuclear capability, and to assess whether there are discontinuities in the scale and nature of the state’s foreign policies that occur with the acquisition of that capability. I also examine the performance of the theory of nuclear opportunism against three other competing explanations for how nuclear weapons affect state foreign policy: S. Paul Kapur’s “strategic pessimism,” defensive realism, and an explanation based on the increasing power of the “nuclear taboo.”

2.4.1 What are we trying to estimate?

The goal of this study is to estimate the effect of nuclear acquisition on the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. Using the language of causal inference, and viewing nuclear weapons acquisition as a “treatment,” we are interested in the treatment effect of nuclear

71. For example, some of these additional complexities were identified above: we might expect that the precise blend of aggression and steadfastness that is likely to be observed for states facing severe territorial threats should be expected to vary according to the proximity of the threat, the conventional balance, and state preferences.


acquisition on the units that receive the treatment. This echoes the concerns of policymakers, who care more about how nuclear acquisition affects the foreign policies of the states that acquire nuclear weapons than they do about how nuclear acquisition would affect the foreign policies of countries such as Botswana or Jamaica, because the possibility of those countries acquiring nuclear weapons is so remote.

Thus, for a state that possesses nuclear weapons, we are interested in the counterfactual of what that state’s foreign policy would look like if they did not possess nuclear weapons. The difference between that counterfactual and the behavior we observe is the effect of nuclear weapons on the state’s foreign policy at a particular point in time.\footnote{This discussion implicitly adopts the counterfactual view of causation. While this is not the only way to think about causation, it is a commonly used approach in the social sciences.} Of course, the problem (and the fundamental problem of causal inference more broadly) is that the counterfactual is inherently unobservable: for example, we do not get to observe how Britain would have behaved without nuclear weapons in 1956, and as a result, we cannot directly observe the difference between that counterfactual and what we do observe: British behavior with nuclear weapons in 1956.

\subsection*{2.4.2 Approach to finding the counterfactual}

We therefore need some way of finding the counterfactual of how a state that has nuclear weapons would behave without nuclear weapons. To continue with the above example, if we want to know the effect of nuclear weapons on British foreign policy in 1956, we would like to know both how Britain behaved with nuclear weapons in 1956 (which we can observe) and how Britain would have behaved in 1956 without nuclear weapons (which we cannot observe). The difference between the two is the effect that nuclear weapons had on British foreign policy in 1956.

How should we approach finding (or estimating) this counterfactual? One approach to this question would be to use the universe of non-nuclear weapon states and compare them to the universe of nuclear weapon states. This is the approach taken by most large-$n$ studies on the effects of nuclear weapons: a simple pooled regression that seeks to estimate the effect of
nuclear weapons implicitly compares the behavior of nuclear weapon states with the behavior of non-nuclear weapon states and attributes the difference in behavior to nuclear weapons (once a range of other variables have been controlled for).\textsuperscript{75} Of course, an important problem with this approach is that non-nuclear weapon states are on average very different to nuclear weapon states in many ways. While we can control for the effect of observed variables on which nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states differ, we cannot (by definition) control for the effects of unobserved variables, and typically cannot rule out that it is one of those unobserved variables (or some combination of them) instead of nuclear weapons is driving the differences in outcomes observed between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states.\textsuperscript{76} It is hard for such studies to convincingly make the jump from finding a correlation between nuclear possession and a particular outcome to an inference about the causal effects of nuclear possession.\textsuperscript{77}

These problems are not limited to quantitative approaches. A qualitative version of this approach would be to undertake a controlled comparison and compare the foreign policy of a state with nuclear weapons to a similar state without nuclear weapons. Thus, if we wanted to know how Britain would behave in 1956 without nuclear weapons, we might examine France—another declining, colonial power—in 1956 and see how their foreign policies differed. Such a study could yield many important insights and might be able to attribute certain differences in British and French foreign policies to the British possession of nuclear weapons. However, Britain and France in 1956 also differed in many ways other than with respect to their possession of nuclear weapons. As a result, if one simply examined the differences between the foreign policy behaviors of the two states, it may be hard to rule out the possibility that it is one of these differences, rather than nuclear weapons, that is driving any differences observed in the outcome variable between the two cases.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} For example, Gartzke and Jo, “Bargaining, Nuclear Proliferation, and Interstate Disputes”; Beardsley and Asal, “Winning with the Bomb”; Sechser and Fuhrmann, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail.”

\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, it is worth noting that large-$n$ work does not even control fully for the variables it includes in the models run, because standard approaches such as generalized linear models can only control for particular functions of each control variable.


I adopt a different approach. I use behavior in the immediate period preceding acquisition as the estimate for the counterfactual of how the country would behave in the period immediately after nuclear acquisition, if it had not acquired nuclear weapons. My answer to the question: “what is the best counterfactual for how Britain would have behaved in the immediate aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons if it had not had nuclear weapons” is “Britain in the period immediately preceding acquiring nuclear weapons.” I therefore examine the period immediately preceding and following nuclear acquisition, and see how behavior changed with nuclear acquisition. More precisely, I look for discontinuities in the scale or nature of the foreign policy behaviors of a state at the point at which it acquires the relevant nuclear capability.

To the extent that other variables that might affect foreign policy behavior do not change over the period of acquisition, we can be more confident that any discontinuity we observe is attributable to nuclear acquisition rather than some other factor. For example, stable (or extremely slow-moving) variables such as political institutions, strategic culture, or the polarity of the international system, as well as the many “fixed effects”—time-invariant factors within a given state that contribute to its foreign policy—are unlikely to be able to explain any discontinuity that occurs in a state’s foreign policy behavior at the point of nuclear acquisition, because such variables are stable over the period being analyzed. This approach therefore allows us to rule out a range of alternative explanations through research design rather than through modelling assumptions, as most large-n work typically does.\(^7^9\) This approach to finding the counterfactual also follows from methodological advice that “the fewer the changes from the actual world required by a counterfactual supposition, the easier it will be to draw and support causal inferences.”\(^8^0\) In this case, the only change from the real world we have to posit is that a state might have taken a few years longer to acquire nuclear weapons than it in fact did.

This approach is similar to the interrupted time series analysis or “time series quasi


\(^8^0\) Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing,” 193-194.
experiment" originally proposed by Campbell and Stanley as a way of assessing the effect of a discrete intervention on some social process.81 This approach is of particular use in applications where a) the dependent variable occurs over time; b) when the treatment occurs at a specific point in time, thus "divid[ing] the time series into two distinct segments,"82 and c) a small number of units receive the treatment. This approach is therefore often used in analyses of treatments of rare psychological or medical conditions, but these criteria apply equally well to analyzing the effects of nuclear acquisition, which occurs at a specific point in time, and has affected relatively few units (in this case, countries).

Philosophically, this approach is somewhat similar to using fixed effects in a statistical analysis, because it focuses on identifying variation in the outcome variable within individual units that occurs with the treatment (nuclear acquisition), and ignores the variation between treated and non-treated units (i.e. between nuclear and non-nuclear states) that could be explained by any of the many other differences between treated and non-treated units. In the same way that large-n work that uses fixed effects is often a more credible basis from which to draw causal inference than pooled regressions, case studies that seek to explain variation within cases rather than across cases also allows for more reliable causal inferences to be made.83

Adopting a qualitative approach offers additional methodological advantages. First, it allows us to utilize process tracing and incorporate speech evidence by elites to increase our confidence that it is indeed nuclear weapons that are causing any change in behavior we observe at the point of nuclear acquisition. For example, suppose that the elites of a country repeatedly state prior to acquiring nuclear weapons that they wish to gain nuclear weapons in order to allow them greater independence from a patron, and we then observe them behaving more independently of that patron in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. If we observe this, it is more reasonable to attribute that change in behavior to nuclear acquisition than if we had simply

observed the behavior change but did not observe the crucial qualitative evidence. Because how leaders think about nuclear weapons represents an important observable implication of the theory I offer, a qualitative approach that allows that evidence to be incorporated provides substantial advantages. Second, the outcomes of interest—the various foreign policy responses identified above—are not easily adapted from existing large-\(n\) datasets. For example, whether a state pursues additional goals in an existing dispute (aggression) may not be fully captured by a change in the number of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) or interstate crises (e.g. the ICB dataset). While such existing datasets may offer insights into the foreign policy behaviors of states, they are insufficient on their own, and do not allow us to test many of the hypotheses proposed by the theory of nuclear opportunism. Effective measurement of the outcomes of interest can, therefore, be more convincingly conducted by using qualitative methods.

Indeed, there are several substantive reasons to think that this approach might underestimate any effects of nuclear weapons we observe. Thus, if we nonetheless find discontinuous changes at the point of nuclear acquisition, we can be more confident that nuclear weapons are indeed playing a causal role. First, we might expect that rational states should anticipate nuclear acquisition by another state, and will thus take actions that minimize any benefits that nuclear acquisition has for the acquiring state at the point of acquisition. For example, adversaries may build up their conventional forces or alter their military doctrines to undercut the benefits of nuclear acquisition that the acquiring state may seek to obtain. If so, such efforts by others are likely to reduce the benefits of nuclear acquisition that a state receives, and thus make it harder to see the effects of nuclear weapons at the point of acquisition. Second, states may begin to receive some political benefits from their possession of nuclear technologies prior to the point of nuclear acquisition. For example, states may be able to use nuclear latency to

---


85. The extent to which this is possible is debatable. For example, India has paid considerable efforts to trying to undermine the strategic benefits that Pakistan gains from its nuclear weapons (most notably through the “Cold Start” doctrine), but it is not clear that these have significantly tempered Pakistan’s ability to aggress against India and use its nuclear weapons as a shield to prevent Indian retaliation. For discussions of Cold Start, see Walter C. Ladwig III, “A Cold Start For Hot Wars? The Indian Army’s New Limited War Doctrine,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 158–190; Shashank Joshi, “India’s Military Instrument: A Doctrine Stillborn,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 512–540.
extract diplomatic concessions or support from other states or perhaps as a "virtual deterrent" to conflict. Third, states may rationally and strategically seek to avoid taking full advantage of their nuclear weapons in the immediate aftermath of nuclear acquisition. States may be concerned about provoking reactive proliferation by neighbors, or about provoking a balancing coalition forming against them. Again, this would reduce the likelihood of seeing a change in foreign policy behavior at the point of acquisition. All of this would suggest that if we nonetheless see a change in behavior at the point of acquisition, we can be more confident that nuclear weapons are indeed playing a causal role.

2.4.3 Shortcomings

This approach is far from a panacea, however. In particular, I here outline five shortcomings associated with the research design chosen, and discuss the extent to which they should undermine the findings of the dissertation.

First, as with all discontinuity-based designs, this research design aims only to uncover the effects of nuclear acquisition at the point of acquisition. If nuclear weapons have effects that change over time, this design would not uncover those effects. This is an important drawback, because some scholars have argued that the effects of nuclear weapons may change over time as states learn about the utility (or disutility) of nuclear weapons, or because nuclear emboldenment is an ephemeral phenomena that dissipates over time. For example, Michael Horowitz argues that "new nuclear states, with a nascent arsenal and lack of experience in nuclearized disputes, play the "nuclear card" significantly more often than their more experienced nuclear counterparts." If nuclear weapons have a different effect on a state’s behavior a decade after acquiring them than they do at the point of acquisition, this research

87. On reactive proliferation, see Miller, “Nuclear Dominoes.”
design would only allow us to uncover the latter and not the former. Similarly, if certain foreign policy behaviors are harder to sustain over time than others, this design might capture a change in behavior immediately after nuclear acquisition, but say very little about how long-lasting those effects might be.

This problem is certainly a drawback, and suggests opportunities for future research. Nonetheless, two factors limit the concern that this problem should cause. First, examining the effect of nuclear weapons at the point of acquisition most accurately reflects the concerns of policymakers. Policymakers are particularly interested in the immediate effects of nuclear weapons at the point of acquisition. For example, policymakers are likely to be more concerned about the effect that nuclear weapons would have on Iranian foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of getting nuclear weapons than they are about what Iran might use its nuclear weapons for once it has had them for twenty years. Second, because we currently lack good theoretical explanations for how nuclear acquisition affects foreign policy, it is worth examining first the effects of nuclear weapons at the point at which their effects can most clearly and convincingly be demonstrated. As discussed, the point of acquisition is the point at which this can most easily be done. Any findings made using this approach can provide a baseline that future studies can build on and add theoretical or empirical qualifications to if the effects of nuclear weapons do indeed change over time. I discuss the possibility of future research on this question in the concluding chapter.

A second concern with this approach is that the state's foreign policy might have changed discontinuously at the point of nuclear acquisition even in the absence of nuclear acquisition. If so, we might wrongly attribute any discontinuity we observe to nuclear acquisition. Of course, this problem would also affect all other methods discussed for assessing the effect of nuclear acquisition on behavior (such as, for example, a regression on country-year data, or comparative case studies). Nonetheless, in order to guard against this possibility, the case studies explicitly consider alternative explanations and look for other variables that either change discontinuously at the same time as nuclear acquisition, or might not change discontinuously but might plausibly cause a "tipping point" effect that could lead to a discontinuous change in the outcome variable.
A third concern would be that we might worry that states wait until the point of nuclear acquisition in order to engage in particular behaviors that they would otherwise have engaged in earlier. As a result, we might see that nuclear weapons lead to a change in behavior, but that what is happening is not that nuclear weapons are causing the state to engage in a greater quantity of the foreign policy behavior in total, but merely that the state is redistributing the amount of behavior over time so that more of it occurs after acquisition. While this might indeed happen, it in some ways validates rather than undermines the theory. If a state delays engaging in a particular activity until they have acquired nuclear weapons, it is revealing evidence that nuclear weapons do in fact assist the state in engaging in that activity. Thus, while this effect may indeed be operating, it does not invalidate the theory I offer.

Fourth, by examining only a small number of cases, there may be a concern both that we lack a sufficient sample size from which to draw strong inferences, and that any findings identified may lack external validity to the wider universe of cases. A first response to this concern is that a convincing claim of internal validity is a strong basis from which to make a claim of external validity. As the statistician Paul Rosenbaum argues: “Internal validity comes first. If you do not know the effects of the treatment on the units in your study, you are not well-positioned to infer the effects on units you did not study.” 91 Thus, if we can convincingly show the effects that nuclear weapons have in particular cases, by examining the effect of nuclear weapons at the point of acquisition where it can be most easily identified, we can more convincingly extrapolate to other cases. Indeed, by picking “hard cases” for the theory, and by testing the theory against other alternative explanations, we can have greater confidence that our findings are generalizable to the effects of nuclear weapons on the other nuclear states.

More broadly, because we are interested in the treatment effect on the treated units, there are in reality only 10 units that have received the treatment: only 10 countries have thus far acquired nuclear weapons. This problem is not unique to qualitative approaches to studying the consequences of proliferation, and large-n work examining the effects of nuclear weapons also faces—and typically does not effectively address—this problem. Large-n studies typically inflate the number of observations by breaking each unit into country- or dyad-year

observations, but these apparently unique observations are far from independent, as the models employed to analyze them typically require.\textsuperscript{92} Using robust standard errors does not fix this problem, and the standard errors reported in most large-\textit{n} studies on nuclear issues therefore likely significantly underestimate the “true” level of uncertainty about the effects of nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{93} Making inferences under conditions of significant uncertainty is however, a critical part of any scientific endeavor. It is preferable to acknowledge the small number of units involved in studying this phenomenon, and the inevitable resulting uncertainty we have about any inferences made about the theory’s validity, than it is to artificially inflate the number of units we claim to observe and the level of certainty we claim.

\subsection*{2.4.4 Measurement}

The theory above suggests that three variables determine the effects that nuclear weapons have on a state’s foreign policies: whether the state faces severe territorial threats or is engaged in an ongoing war; whether a state has a senior alliance partner that provides for the state’s security; and whether the state is rising or falling in relative power. This section discusses how we should go about measuring these three variables. I then discuss how I identify the relevant point at which the effects of nuclear weapons should be observed. Third, I discuss issues relating to distinguishing and identifying the different possible foreign policy effects identified in the typology.

The first variable in the theory is the existence of severe territorial threats or the presence of an ongoing war. The threats that a state faces can be directly observed, although sometimes elite perceptions of the threat may deviate from the objective reality. This variable has several components.\textsuperscript{94} First, the threat must be proximate, which is to say that it must either be


\textsuperscript{94} I draw on the classic disaggregation of threat offered by Walt, \textit{The Origins of Alliances}, 21–26. This variable, and the components that make it up, are similar to the “conventionally superior proximate offensive threat” variable used by Narang, \textit{Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era}, although it has some differences. For example, I do not require the threat to be conventionally superior in order to be severe, merely that the acquiring state does itself not have conventional superiority. Thus, situations in which there is an approximate conventional parity may count as a
on a state’s borders, or able to threaten a state’s borders in short order. Threats that are geographically distant, or which must pass over inhospitable terrain in order to threaten a state, do not count as severe territorial threats. Second, the threat must have sufficient conventional military power, or have the potential to raise sufficient conventional military power in short order, to threaten a substantial portion of the state’s territory (which is to say, the threat must have some capability to project power offensively). This does not require that the state be conventionally inferior to the source of threat. For example, a state may face a severe territorial threat even if it has a somewhat superior quality and quantity of forces if the territory on which it would have to fight is extremely difficult to defend, or if the advantage they possessed is conditional on being the first mover in a conflict, or if the source of threat could quickly raise more forces. Third, the threat must be perceived by the state to have aggressive intentions. A state cannot be defined as facing a severe territorial threat if it does not feel that it is threatened. All three of these criteria must be met for a state to be said to face a severe territorial threat. Similarly, empirically observing whether a state is involved in an ongoing war is also not typically problematic: we have good historical records of the wars that states have fought and the periods in which they fought them (this is especially true for the states which have acquired nuclear weapons, which are—almost by definition—not obscure or minor powers).

The second variable is whether or not the state has a senior ally that provides (in full or in part) for the state’s security. This variable is relatively easy to observe and, thus, to measure. It is generally straightforward to identify alliance patterns because many alliances are formalized in defense pacts or security assurances, and are accompanied by substantial resource flows and diplomatic support. While some close allies may not codify their alliance in a formal agreement or defense pact (such as the U.S.-Israeli relationship), the consistent patterns of economic, military, and political support that the United States has provided to Israel over a long period of time makes it clear that the United States and Israel have a strong alliance relationship and that the United States in part provides for Israel’s security. We can also look to the speech evidence of elites in both states for evidence of perceptions of an alliance: if a

---

state believes that another state is an ally, or that another state would come to its aid, then that belief may affect its behavior and nuclear acquisition may affect the costs associated with that behavior. Identifying which party is the senior ally in the alliance is also straightforward. Typically the senior state in the alliance will be the more militarily powerful state and the one contributing resources and commitments to the other state, and will be recognized as such by both partners in the alliance.96

The third variable is whether or not the state is rising or declining in relative power. This variable can be measured easily (if crudely) using the Correlates of War Project’s CINC scores, which provide a measure of a state’s share of total global power. If a state’s CINC score is increasing, that indicates that its share of global power is increasing. The variable can also be measured qualitatively by examining the speech evidence and writings of leaders and other elites in the state, because elites may have a strong belief that the state’s relative power position is worsening, even if that is not in fact the case. While perceptions and realities of power trajectories can diverge,97 in the cases examined in this dissertation the codings of the two approaches align.

Finally, we also need to identify the point of nuclear acquisition. This is of critical importance to the research design described above, because the point of acquisition provides the point at which to look for any discontinuities in the state’s behavior. Getting this coding wrong could lead to misleading or incorrect inferences.98 As discussed, what matters in each case is the point at which the state’s nuclear weapons can be deployed and used in the way the state intends. The technological requirements for this will vary from state to state according to its nuclear posture.99 For example, South Africa—a country which intended to test nuclear weapons on its own territory in order to “catalyze” U.S. intervention on its behalf—would not even require a fully deliverable weapon in order for nuclear weapons to affect its calculations about the risks of different foreign policy options. As soon as South Africa possessed a testable

---

device, South Africa could threaten to conduct a nuclear test, and then use that threat to raise the probability of U.S. intervention on its behalf, thus reducing the risks associated with a range of foreign policy actions. On the other hand, for a country like Britain—which planned to deliver nuclear weapons to Soviet cities—a far more sophisticated capability was required before nuclear weapons began to affect British foreign policy calculations. Because Britain had to be able to deliver nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union with some reliability for them to affect British calculations, it was not until 1955 that Britain had the capabilities required—well after Britain first carried out a nuclear test in 1952. Thus, in each case, it is necessary to pay significant attention to the state’s intended nuclear posture and the manner in which the state intends to use its nuclear weapons, and the particular technological requirements that such uses require. This enables us to accurately identify the relevant point of acquisition for each state, and therefore the appropriate point in time at which to look for discontinuities in foreign policy behavior.

2.5 Alternative explanations

In order to assess the validity and usefulness of the theory above, it is helpful to test its empirical predictions against those made by other plausible explanations. A theory may perform well in an absolute sense, but if it only performs as well as a more parsimonious theory, it is likely to be of little use. Similarly, a theory may perform badly in an absolute sense, but if it performs better than its competitors the theory may still be useful. Testing theories against each other in a “horse race” is thus a useful exercise that sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. However, the task is made harder by the fact discussed above that we currently lack well-developed alternative theories of how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. As a result, I derive or extrapolate several alternative explanations from existing schools of thought about nuclear weapons and

international politics for the ways in which nuclear weapons might affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them.\textsuperscript{103} I examine three alternative explanations which can be tested against the theory of nuclear opportunism: the “strategic pessimism” articulated by S. Paul Kapur, defensive realism; and a norms-based explanation that draws on the idea of a “nuclear taboo.”

2.5.1 Strategic pessimism

As discussed above, the works of S. Paul Kapur offer the most thoroughly specified account within the extant literature of the effects of nuclear weapons on the foreign policies of the states that acquire them.\textsuperscript{104} Kapur argues that nuclear acquisition creates incentives for conventional aggression only for conventionally weak states with territorially revisionist preferences. It is weak states who gain the most from nuclear acquisition because of their relative inability to deter attacks conventionally, and it is revisionist states who have the desire to use this increase in their deterrent power in order to pursue territorial gains beyond the status quo. Kapur summarizes the logic of his argument:

“Under what conditions would a new nuclear state be encouraged to undertake aggressive conventional behavior? First, a state would need to have a reason to behave aggressively. Its leaders would have to be dissatisfied with the territorial status quo and anxious to change it. If a state’s leadership were satisfied with the status quo, they would have little reason to behave aggressively, with or without nuclear weapons. Second, a state’s leaders would need to believe that the acquisition of nuclear weapons had altered the state’s military relationship with its primary adversary, enabling the state potentially to change the status quo where it previously could not. Such a state would be conventionally weak relative to its adversary. If it were conventionally strong...it could have used its superior conventional forces to

\textsuperscript{103} See Narang, \textit{Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era}, for a similar approach.

\textsuperscript{104} Kapur, “India and Pakistan’s Unstable Peace”; Kapur, \textit{Dangerous Deterrent}; Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability”; Ganguly and Kapur, \textit{India, Pakistan, and the Bomb}. Kapur only uses the “strategic pessimism” label in his later work.
change the status quo even without nuclear weapons.” Kapur is clear that these are the only states for whom conventional aggression should be expected in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. In his words, “the acquisition of nuclear weapons is likely to encourage aggressive conventional behavior only on the part of weak, revisionist states. No other combinations of territorial preferences and military capabilities are likely to promote increased conventional aggression by new nuclear powers.” Kapur is not explicit, however, about whether states that are not weak and revisionist should be expected to see no effects of nuclear acquisition or simply that they do not engage in increased conventional aggression (but might engage in other behaviors). However, he implies that states that are not both weak and revisionist do not alter their behavior significantly when they acquire nuclear weapons. For example, he argues that only “under certain conditions [do] nuclear weapons fundamentally alter international behavior, leading states to behave differently,” i.e. when they are acquired by weak, revisionist states. Similarly, when discussing Iran, he argues that “If Iran is not both weak and revisionist, international fears regarding a nuclear Iran may be exaggerated,” suggesting that if so, Iran would be unlikely to change its behavior significantly if it acquired nuclear weapons. The hypothesis generated by this alternative explanation is therefore that:

\[ H_{Pes}: \text{States that are conventionally weak and have revisionist preferences will use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression; other states should experience little or no effect of nuclear acquisition on their foreign policies.} \]

This explanation differs from the theory of nuclear opportunism in a few respects, although both explanations agree that states in precarious security environments are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. First, the theory of nuclear opportunism does not treat revisionism as an independent variable, as Kapur does. Instead, nuclear opportunism views revisionism as something that nuclear weapons can incentivize, rather than a measurable

---

105. Kapur, Dangerous Deterrent, 41.
106. Ibid., 141.
107. Ibid., 61.
108. Ibid., 166.
“pre-treatment” characteristic exhibited by some states and not others. As James Fearon asks, are there any states that “would not want to change anything about the territorial status quo or the status quo with respect to other issues, if they could do so at no cost and with no consequences?”109 If, as Fearon suggests, there are few or no such states, whether a state is revisionist is not the correct question to ask, because all states are somewhat revisionist if the cost of revisionism is low enough. Instead, the relevant variable is the cost of engaging in revisionist behavior, a variable that is affected by nuclear acquisition. Second, the theory of nuclear opportunism seeks to explain a wider range of outcomes than the theory of strategic pessimism. Conventional aggression is not the only potential effect of nuclear acquisition, and the theory of nuclear opportunism therefore seeks to explain a wider range of foreign policy outcomes.

The critical cases for examining the relative merits of Kapur’s theory against the theory of nuclear opportunism are those involving powerful and/or states states with largely “status quo” preferences. It is in these cases in which Kapur anticipates little effect of nuclear acquisition, but for which the theory of nuclear opportunism makes different predictions. If such states use nuclear weapons to facilitate important changes in their foreign policies, then Kapur’s theory is at least incomplete.

2.5.2 Defensive realism

According to Kenneth Waltz and other defensive realists, nuclear weapons are a fundamentally stabilizing force within international politics. On this view, insecurity is one of the taproots of conflictual behavior in international politics, and because nuclear weapons offer states a powerful means of providing for their own security, nuclear acquisition ought to lead states to moderate aggression, reduce their need for expansion, and become more inclined to compromise with adversaries. In Waltz’s words, “the likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase,” as happens when a state acquires nuclear weapons.110

Nuclear weapons increase the potential costs of wars, and also reduce states’ need to engage in them. Indeed, according to some defensive realists, possessing nuclear weapons might actually increase the costs of engaging in aggressive behavior, even against non-nuclear armed opponents. As Waltz wrote with respect to potential Iranian nuclear acquisition: Iran would likely “become acutely aware that their nuclear weapons make them a potential target in the eyes of major powers. This awareness discourages nuclear states from bold and aggressive action.” This suggests that nuclear acquisition actually raises the costs of risk-taking behavior because nuclear states are more tightly watched by the great powers for any sign of aggression, and therefore that states should actually engage in less of those behaviors upon nuclear acquisition. A distinct but related defensive-realist logic is that nuclear weapons help to clarify the costs of war, thus reducing the false optimism and misperceptions about the consequences of war that many defensive realists view as a historically important cause of war.

Defensive realists would therefore not be surprised if nuclear-armed states used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness and independence. After all, nuclear weapons increase a state’s ability to defend itself, and therefore make threats against that state less credible, whether from allies or enemies. Similarly, defensive realists also anticipate that states should recognize that nuclear weapons have made them more secure, and thus would anticipate that states should be more willing to make compromises than states without nuclear weapons. However, states should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression or expansion because such behaviors are largely driven by insecurity and states are made more secure by nuclear acquisition. Similarly, because defensive realists view alliances as responses to threats and thus typically defensive in nature, states should also not use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of allies.

111. For other defensive realist accounts of the effects of nuclear weapons, see Feldman, Israeli Nuclear Deterrence; Jervis, The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy; Jervis, The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution; Van Evera, Causes of War.
113. For example, Jervis writes that “the possession of nuclear weapons can decrease the state’s freedom of action by increasing the suspicion with which it is viewed.” Jervis, The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution, 3.
114. Van Evera, Causes of War, 244.
115. Feldman, Israeli Nuclear Deterrence.
The defensive realist hypothesis is therefore:

\[ H_{\text{Def}}: \text{States should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, expansion, or bolstering upon nuclear acquisition, but should use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise.} \]

The defensive realist explanation differs from the theory of nuclear opportunism in a number of respects. In particular, defensive realism position takes a different theoretical view on the nature of state preferences. For defensive realists, states are inherently security-seeking and most aggressive state behaviors emerges from perceived or actual insecurity. As a result, states use nuclear weapons to protect what they have and guarantee their survival, but ultimately seek to do or achieve little more with their nuclear weapons. By contrast, the theory of nuclear opportunism views states as more ambitious actors that seek to gain strategic benefits that they can from possessing nuclear weapons. Because nuclear weapons may also reduce the cost of engaging in a range of different behaviors, the theory of nuclear opportunism suggests that nuclear weapons can create incentives for those behaviors.

In all cases the defensive realist position makes different predictions to the theory of nuclear opportunism. Every case examined should therefore provide some evidence of the relative merits of the two explanations. To the extent that we see states engaging in aggression, expansion or bolstering upon nuclear acquisition, this would count against the defensive realist explanation.

2.5.3 Norms over time

According to Nina Tannenwald, an increasingly robust norm or taboo opposing nuclear use constrains states from using nuclear weapons.\(^\text{117}\) While up until the late 1950s U.S. strategists sought to portray nuclear weapons as “just another weapon,” the United States was ultimately unable to prevent an increasingly robust norm against nuclear use from taking root, fueled by

the global anti-nuclear weapons movement, non-nuclear armed states, and Cold War politics.\textsuperscript{118} What does this explanation have to say about how nuclear acquisition should affect state foreign policy? The existence of a nuclear taboo should be expected to reduce the circumstances under which nuclear use is credible. Because the effects of nuclear weapons on state foreign policy depend on the possibility that they might be used, the presence of a robust taboo against nuclear use should reduce the effects that nuclear weapons have on a state's foreign policy. While the nuclear taboo argument does not make determinate predictions for the precise behaviors we should observe upon acquisition by any given state, it does suggest that we should observe nuclear acquisition having increasingly small effects on state foreign policy over time. For example, while early proliferants such as the United States and Soviet Union may have been able to use nuclear weapons to facilitate significant changes in their foreign policies over time, nuclear weapons should have a much more limited effect on the foreign policies of later proliferants because of the reduced likelihood of nuclear use.

\( H_{\text{Norm}}: \) Nuclear acquisition should have an increasingly small effect on state foreign policy the later the point of nuclear acquisition.

This explanation is not necessarily a direct competitor to the theory of nuclear opportunism. That is, one might think that the theory of nuclear opportunism correctly describes how states respond to nuclear acquisition, but nonetheless feel that those effects will become increasingly muted over time as the taboo has strengthened. Indeed, because one of the assumptions of the theory of nuclear opportunism (discussed above) is that the use of nuclear weapons can credibly be threatened, Tannenwald's argument could be incorporated into the theory of nuclear opportunism by turning that assumption into a variable (credibility of use) that changes over time. Nonetheless, the policy implications of Tannenwald's theory are that nuclear acquisition today would have very different—and far less significant—implications for state foreign policy than it did earlier in the nuclear age. These implications are sufficiently different from those of the theory of nuclear pragmatism that it is worth treating Tannenwald's theory as an alternative explanation and examining its performance explicitly.

\textsuperscript{118} Tannenwald, "Stigmatizing the Bomb," 7.
In examining the merits of this explanation, cases from different time periods will provide significant leverage. If we observe that nuclear weapons have similar or smaller effects in cases of nuclear acquisition from early in the nuclear age as we do in cases later in the nuclear age, it would suggest the nuclear taboo does not provide substantial explanatory power in explaining how nuclear acquisition has affected state foreign policy over time.

2.6 Case selection

I examine three cases that each provide hard cases for the theory for a range of reasons. Picking hard cases allows for more confidence in the external validity of the findings—if we find support for the theory despite picking cases that we would expect the theory to have difficulty explaining, it increases the likelihood that the theory will have some success in cases we do not examine in detail. In doing so, I pay particular attention to cases in which the theory of nuclear opportunism makes different predictions to those of the alternative explanations.\textsuperscript{119} I also examine cases in which primary documentary or interview evidence about the foreign policy process at the time of nuclear acquisition is available. This criterion increases the likelihood of identifying evidence about the precise point at which the state acquired the relevant capabilities, and about the process by which nuclear weapons affected (or did not affect) state foreign policy at the point of acquisition.

Chapter 3 examines the case of Britain. Britain provides a useful case for several reasons. First, it is a hard case for the theory because many theories of international relations would expect a state like Britain—a status quo, democratic, conventionally powerful state with a nuclear-armed patron, and large geographic buffers between Britain and its primary rival—to have little need to prominently emphasize weapons of mass destruction in its foreign policy or to see a substantial effect of nuclear acquisition on its foreign policy.\textsuperscript{120} All of these would suggest that finding a substantial effect of nuclear weapons is unlikely in this case. Second, the British case provides an excellent case with which to adjudicate the relative merits of the theory

\textsuperscript{119} For a similar approach, see Press, Calculating Credibility.

of nuclear opportunism against two of the alternative explanations: both strategic pessimism
and defensive realism make different predictions from the theory of nuclear opportunism. As
discussed above, the strategic pessimism school of thought anticipates that emboldenment
occurs only when weak, revisionist powers acquire nuclear weapons. Britain, a conventionally
powerful state with status quo preferences, meets neither of those conditions, and should thus
be seen as a “least likely” case for any “emboldening” behavior. Similarly, defensive realism
would anticipate steadfastness, independence, and compromise but no other emboldening
effects. The theory of nuclear opportunism also predicts that Britain would use nuclear weapons
to facilitate independence from the United States and steadfastness in responding to challenges
to its position, but would also anticipate Britain using nuclear weapons to bolster existing
alliances.

The second case is that of South Africa, examined in Chapter 4. South Africa also provides
a useful case with which to examine the relative merits of the theory of nuclear opportunism
against the alternative explanations. South Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s was
a conventionally powerful state with (increasingly desperate) status quo preferences, and
thus Kapur’s strategic pessimism would anticipate that nuclear acquisition would have little
or no effect. The defensive realist explanation anticipates steadfastness, independence, and
compromise, but no other emboldening effects. And because South Africa also acquired nuclear
weapons relatively late in the nuclear era and well after the nuclear taboo had taken root—if the
nuclear taboo argument holds any validity we should therefore also expect that South African
acquisition of nuclear weapons would have little effect. South Africa’s nuclear experience also
provides a hard case for the theory of nuclear opportunism for other reasons. For example,
South Africa only developed a small, secret, and relatively unsophisticated arsenal. If the scale
or diversity of a state’s arsenal affects its utility, as some have argued, we should anticipate that
South African nuclear weapons would have limited effect on its foreign policy.121 By contrast,
the theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that South Africa—engaged in an ongoing war
in Angola and facing the possibility of direct Soviet intervention in southern Africa that would

121. Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve”; Erik Gartzke, Jeffrey M. Kaplow, and Rupal N.
overturn South Africa’s military advantages—would use nuclear weapons to facilitate both aggression and steadfastness against the source of threat.

The third case is that of the United States, examined in Chapter 5. Again, the United States provides a case that allows us to distinguish between the performance of the theory of nuclear opportunism against the alternative explanations. Kapur’s theory of strategic pessimism would anticipate that nuclear acquisition would have little or no effect because the United States was an extremely powerful state when it acquired nuclear weapons. The defensive realist explanation anticipates steadfastness, independence, and compromise, but no other emboldening effects. And the norms-based explanation anticipates a significant effect of nuclear acquisition, but does not make determinate predictions about the nature of that effect. The theory of nuclear opportunism, on the other hand, makes different predictions. The theory anticipates that the United States—engaged in a brutal war that demanded the expenditure of significant American blood and treasure when it sought and acquired nuclear weapons—would use them to engage in aggression against Japan (and would have used them for the same purpose against Germany had they been ready before the war in Europe ended). In the aftermath of World War II, the theory anticipates that the United States—not facing any territorial threats and rising in relative power—would use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of its allies and an expansion of its position and ambitions in world politics. Thus, because the variables that the theory of nuclear opportunism identifies as conditioning the effects of nuclear acquisition themselves change dramatically at the end of World War II, the theory predicts that nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy differently during World War II and in the aftermath of the war. The case of the United States thus offers an additional set of observable implications of the theory, and thus offers a particularly useful test. The case is also a highly historically unusual—the United States was the first nation to acquire nuclear weapons and did so in highly abnormal historical circumstances. If the theory can nonetheless shed light on the way in which nuclear weapons affected U.S. foreign policy in addition to other cases in which states acquired nuclear weapons under more historically typical circumstances, this would provide an important validation of the scope of the theory’s
explanatory power.  

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has laid out a theory for how nuclear acquisition affects the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. Past literature has failed to provide us with a sufficiently flexible or theoretically complete explanation for this important phenomenon. I have therefore offered both a typology of foreign policy behaviors, and a testable theory that explains why different states will use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of these behaviors. The following chapters test this theory against the cases. In each case I first measure the independent variables: the presence of senior allies; the existence of severe threats on the state's border; and the power trajectory of the state. I use these codings to make predictions for the particular combinations of behaviors that should be expected in the case, and for the ways in which elites in the state should have thought about nuclear weapons. I identify the point at which each state acquired the relevant nuclear capability, and examine whether there are discontinuities in the foreign policy behaviors of the state at that point that correspond (or not) to the predictions of the theory, and the alternative explanations. I examine both the performance of the theory of nuclear opportunism directly in each case, as well as its relative performance against the three alternative explanations: Kapur's strategic pessimism, defensive realism, and a norms-based explanation.

122. There are also very important challenges associated with analyzing the case of the United States, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5.
Chapter 3

Britain

This chapter examines the ways that nuclear acquisition affected the foreign policies of Britain.\textsuperscript{1} The British case provides considerable leverage in testing the theory laid out above, because the predictions for British behavior made by the theory of nuclear opportunism differ substantially from those made by extant theories. Whereas other theories would predict that nuclear acquisition would have a limited effect on the foreign policy of a state with status quo preferences, considerable conventional military capabilities, and a nuclear-armed ally, the theory of nuclear opportunism suggests that British nuclear acquisition should have had a considerable effect on British foreign policy. I argue that, consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism laid out in Section 2.3, Britain used its nuclear weapons to act more independently of the United States, respond more steadfastly to challenges to its position, and to bolster existing junior allies, upon achieving a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.

This chapter proceeds in five parts. First, Section 3.1 outlines the particular utility of the British case in testing the theory. Second, Section 3.2 describes the predictions made by the theory, and identifies the point at which British nuclear weapons should be theoretically expected to affect British foreign policy calculations. Third, Section 3.3 examines British foreign policy in the period before and after Britain obtained a deliverable capability in 1955. I argue that the acquisition of a deliverable capability in 1955 marks a discontinuity in British foreign policy behavior that is consistent with the theory advanced. Britain did not use its

\textsuperscript{1} Some of the empirical material in this chapter appears in Bell, "Beyond Emboldenment."
nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, expansion, or compromise. Britain did, however, use nuclear weapons to bolster existing junior allies and respond to challenges to its position more steadfastly and independently of the United States. Fourth, Section 3.4 examines British elite thinking about the utility of nuclear weapons. I show that British elites believed that nuclear weapons were useful in facilitating the behaviors that Britain engaged in upon nuclear acquisition, providing additional evidence that nuclear weapons caused the change in foreign policy that we observe. Finally, Section 3.5 examines the performance of the three alternative explanations.

3.1 The utility of the British case

The British case provides significant leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. The British case both presents a “hard case” for the theory and allows us to distinguish between the performance of the theory of nuclear opportunism and the alternative explanations.

First, the case of Britain presents a hard case because many theories of, or commonly held intuitions about, international relations would expect a state like Britain to have little need to prominently emphasize weapons of mass destruction in its grand strategy, and, therefore, that the acquisition of nuclear weapons would have a limited effect on British foreign policies. For example, when it acquired nuclear weapons, Britain was a state with status quo preferences, had substantial conventional military power, possessed a nuclear-armed ally committed to its protection, and benefited from highly defensible sea borders. All of these factors would suggest that Britain would have relatively little need for nuclear weapons, and, therefore, that the acquisition of nuclear weapons would have relatively little effect on British foreign policy. If the theory of nuclear opportunism performs well in a case in which we would expect that nuclear weapons would have little effect, this would provide a good indication that the theory offers significant explanatory power.

Second, the British case provides an excellent case with which to adjudicate the relative merits of the theory of nuclear opportunism and two of the alternative explanations: both strategic pessimism and defensive realism make different predictions from the theory of nuclear
opportunism (the third alternative explanation, based on the nuclear taboo and the growing strength of norms of nuclear non-use, does not make determinate predictions in the British case). As discussed in Section 2.5, strategic pessimism anticipates that emboldenment in the form of conventional aggression occurs only when weak, revisionist powers acquire nuclear weapons. Britain, a conventionally powerful state with status quo preferences, meets neither of those conditions. Kapur’s theory, therefore, anticipates that nuclear weapons would have little effect on British foreign policy. Defensive realism anticipates that nuclear acquisition would lead to steadfastness, independence, and compromise, but that nuclear weapons would have no other effects in the British case. As I discuss in more detail below, the theory of nuclear opportunism also predicts that Britain would use nuclear weapons to pursue independence from the United States, and exhibit greater steadfastness in responding to challenges to its position, but also anticipates Britain using nuclear weapons to bolster existing alliances, an outcome that would not be predicted by the defensive realist explanation.

3.2 Predictions

What effects does the theory of nuclear opportunism predict that nuclear weapons would have on British foreign policies? This section measures the variables identified in Chapter 2, and uses them to make a series of predictions for the British case. I make predictions about how British foreign policy behavior should have changed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and the ways in which British elites should have thought about the utility of nuclear weapons.

In order to generate precise predictions, we first need to identify the historical juncture at which the variables should be measured, and the point at which the effects of nuclear weapons should be anticipated. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is necessary to pay attention to the intended British nuclear posture and manner in which nuclear weapons were intended to be used, and the particular technological and military capabilities that such uses required. This enables us to accurately identify the relevant point of acquisition for Britain, and therefore the appropriate point in time at which to look for discontinuities in foreign policy behavior. The British planned to deliver their nuclear weapons to the cities of the Soviet Union, and
British doctrine thus “presumed a strategic bomber force capable of attaining targets in the Soviet Union.”2 As A.J.R. Groom summarizes British thinking in this period, “a carriage is of little use without a horse.”3 Thus, for nuclear weapons to affect British calculations about foreign policy, Britain had to be able to deliver nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union with some reliability. This did not occur immediately upon Britain’s testing of its first device in 1952, and nuclear weapons were not even delivered to Bomber Command until November 1953. It was in 1955, as the Valiant bombers came into service and trials to match the new weapons to the delivery vehicles were undertaken, that Britain was able to deliver a nuclear weapon to the Soviet Union.4 The Canberra bombers that Britain possessed prior to 1955 were capable of (though had not been designed for) delivering atomic weapons but did not have the range to reach the Soviet Union and so were not considered a strategic asset.5 The Valiants were less capable than the Victor and Vulcan bombers (collectively known as V-bombers) which came into service in the late 1950s, Britain did not conduct a live drop from an aircraft until October 1956, and it was not until 1960 that British Bomber Command had its full planned complement of V-bomber squadrons. Nonetheless, the Valiants provided Britain with a strategic delivery capability from 1955 onwards.6 As Humphrey Wynn’s secret internal Royal Air Force (RAF) history of the development of the strategic nuclear deterrent argues, it was in 1955 that “an A-bomb could have been deployed operationally by the RAF.”7 This dating is corroborated by Baylis and Stoddart’s recent history of the British nuclear program, which argues that the RAF had an “operational capability from mid-1955 onwards.”8

3. Ibid., 120.
7. Wynn, The RAF Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Forces, 98.
The importance of deliverability was not lost on British leaders. Even in 1954, Churchill argued that "we ourselves have no effective nuclear deterrents [though] we are making progress...British possession of nuclear weapons of the highest quality and on an appreciable scale, together with their means of delivery...should greatly reinforce the deterrent power of the free world." Anthony Eden notes in his memoirs that "alone among the allies of the United States, we were making nuclear bombs and building air power to deliver them." Similarly, the Chief of the Air Staff argued in 1954 that Britain's "ability to put those bombs down where we want to" was the crucial capability Britain required to gain benefits from nuclear weapons, and identified the incoming V-Bombers as providing that capacity.

What changes in behavior should we expect to see in 1955? I now apply the theory laid out in Chapter 2 to generate predictions for the case of Britain. The theory's application to the British case, and the resulting predictions, are summarized in Figure 3.1.

The first variable in the sequence is the presence of a serious territorial threat or ongoing war requiring the dedication of significant national resources. Britain was certainly not involved in any war at the point at which it acquired nuclear weapons. And as an island nation with considerable conventional power and a particularly powerful navy, Britain did not face serious territorial threats. Although British strategists were acutely aware of Soviet conventional power, undoubtedly viewed the Soviet Union as an adversary with aggressive intentions, and feared Soviet nuclear coercion, the Soviet Union did not pose a proximate threat to the British mainland, and British strategists recognized that the English Channel and Western Europe (and the large number of American and NATO forces stationed there) provided a substantial buffer between them and the Soviet Union. While Britain certainly faced challenges within its empire, these did not pose threats to the British homeland, and primarily emerged from internal demands for self-determination within the colonies, rather than from external foes.

Figure 3.1: Predictions in the British case

1. State faces serious territorial threat/ongoing war?
   - Yes → Aggression & steadiness towards threat
   - No

2. State has senior ally?
   - Yes
   - Independence from senior ally
   - No

3. State is rising in power?
   - Yes → Expansion, steadiness, & bolstering of junior allies
   - No → Bolstering of junior allies & steadiness towards rivals

And despite its ongoing decline (discussed further below), Britain remained a conventionally powerful state by any reasonable metric. It was the third most powerful country in the world, and continued to preside over a large empire and network of bases across strategically important regions, including remaining the dominant power in the Middle East.\(^\text{14}\) The threats that Britain faced, therefore, do not amount to the level necessary to classify Britain as facing severe territorial threats. The theory suggests that states not facing such threats should not find it attractive to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. As a result, the theory predicts that Britain would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression.

\(H_{\text{Britain}}\): Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression in

---

the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.

We therefore move to the second variable in the sequence: whether the state acquiring nuclear weapons has a senior alliance partner that helps provide for the state’s defense. Britain did possess such an ally: the United States. The Anglo-American relationship, which had grown closer prior to World War II, transformed during the war. Even before the term “special relationship” was coined in a private communication by Winston Churchill in 1943, the United States had taken a key role in financing British security and supporting the British position in the war through the destroyers-for-bases deal in 1940 and Lend Lease in 1941.15 Cooperation between the two countries was so significant during the war that General George Marshall claimed that Anglo-American planning in World War II represented “the most complete unification of military effort ever achieved by two allied states.”16 An inevitable cooling of the relationship occurred in the immediate aftermath of the war. Nonetheless, as British elites recognized the extent of British decline, American ascendancy, and the increasing Soviet threat, a consensus emerged that the partnership with the United States contributed in important ways to British security.17 Underpinned by a mutual interest in containing Soviet power and reinforced by cultural and linguistic ties, the United States played an important role in providing for British security. The Anglo-American loan of 1946, the Marshall Plan (around 30% of which was invested in Britain), and the formation of NATO all formalized this relationship. By the time Britain acquired nuclear weapons, the United States was a core contributor to British security.

The theory suggests that states with a senior ally and not facing serious threats use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence from that ally. States whose security is partly provided for by a senior ally are constrained if they wish to engage in behaviors that that senior ally does not support. This constraint is typically binding because very few states’ interests converge entirely with those of their allies. Indeed, Britain and the United States disagreed on a number

17. Ibid., 38–39.
of policy issues, most prominently those relating to decolonization and British colonial interests around the world. The constraints that dependence on a senior ally imposes means that states not facing grave and immediate security threats are likely to be eager to increase their ability to act independently of their senior ally.\textsuperscript{18} As discussed above, nuclear weapons offer states the ability to reduce the costs of independence because they can serve as a partial substitute for the alliance. By providing a source of internal military capacity, nuclear weapons reduce the importance of the material and military support the state gets from its senior alliance partner. This, in turn, reduces the fear in the junior state of having that support withdrawn or reduced, and thus makes actions that the senior ally opposes less costly to pursue. The theory therefore expects that we should see Britain having fewer qualms about acting independently of the United States in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

\textbf{H}_{\text{Britain }2}: \text{ Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.}

The third variable in the sequence is whether the state is rising or declining in power relative to its key competitors. It is clear that Britain was in long-run relative decline. Britain had emerged from World War II victorious but bloodied and economically weaker than in 1938: gold reserves had dropped from $864 to $453 million, a quarter of Britain's overseas investments had been sold to help fund the war effort, external liabilities had risen from £760 to £3,353 million, and exports were down 30%\textsuperscript{19}. In the immediate aftermath of the war British officials retained some optimism that they could recover their status as a great power (a view shared by some American officials).\textsuperscript{20} Nonetheless, by 1947, British officials had arrived at the more realistic view that "weaknesses seemingly provisional in 1945 were now judged permanent. Optimism about the long-term recovery of world power status for Britain was displaced by pessimistic appreciations of ebbing power."\textsuperscript{21} This view was shared by American officials, with Secretary of State Acheson declaring bluntly in 1947 that "The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Goldstein, Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Pierre, Nuclear Politics, 69; Peden, Arms, Economics and British Strategy, 245-249.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Adamthwaite, "Britain and the World, 1945-9," 231.
\end{itemize}
British are finished. They are through."

And by the end of the 1940s, Britain was in the midst of retrenchment, with the accession to independence of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Burma, and Britain’s ability to safeguard its interests was open to serious doubt: “the economic situation was such as to engender grave doubt as to Britain’s ability to sustain a military establishment capable of supporting a foreign policy designed to thwart any hostile action on the part of the Soviet Union.”

The claim that Britain was declining in relative power at the point at which it acquired a deliverable nuclear capability is confirmed by the Correlates of War’s Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) scores, which provide a measure of a state’s share of global power. Britain’s CINC score in 1955 was around 20 percent lower than it had been in 1950 and nearly 50 percent lower than it had been in 1939, and this downward trajectory would continue in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

There is therefore no doubt that British power was on a downward trajectory at the point at which Britain acquired nuclear weapons.

For states in such a position, the theory predicts that bolstering junior allies is particularly attractive. States in relative decline find maintaining alliances in which it is the senior partner to be increasingly costly and hard to sustain. Nuclear weapons provide a lower cost way of sustaining an alliance, because by adding a nuclear component to the alliance, the state can now make an alliance commitment with fewer conventional forces. States in relative decline therefore tend to see nuclear weapons as a way of making existing commitments of this sort more affordable. Thus, the theory predicts that Britain would respond to nuclear acquisition by seeking to bolster existing junior allies.

Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering of existing junior allies in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.

Britain should not, however, have found expansion attractive. For states declining in power,

---

holding on to what the state already has poses enough of a challenge. Widening a state’s goals in international politics is unlikely to be feasible or attractive for such states, even if they acquire nuclear weapons. Similarly, compromise is not attractive to such states. For states seeking to maintain their position in international politics, giving up that position in the aftermath of acquiring an additional source of military power is unattractive. Nuclear weapons do, however, incentivize steadfastness for states in this position. When a state relies on nuclear deterrence to a greater degree, and reduces the conventional capabilities that it previously relied on (i.e., uses nuclear weapons as a substitute for conventional forces), the risk of escalation to the nuclear level grows for any state challenging the nuclear state. Because the nuclear state has fewer conventional military options, the nuclear option becomes relatively more appealing, and escalation becomes more dangerous for the challenging state. As a result, the nuclear state should be better able to hold firm in defending what it has.

\[ H_{\text{Britain } 4}: \text{Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.} \]

\[ H_{\text{Britain } 5}: \text{Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.} \]

\[ H_{\text{Britain } 6}: \text{Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955.} \]

Thus, the theory predicts that Britain would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion, aggression, or compromise. Instead, the theory anticipates that Britain would use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of existing allies, steadfastness in response to challenges, and independence from the United States. These predictions refer to the changes in state foreign policy behavior we should expect to observe in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. However, the theory also has observable implications for British elite thinking about nuclear weapons. What should British elites have thought that nuclear weapons were offering them, and would be useful for? The theory suggests that British elites should have had two political priorities that they believed nuclear weapons were useful in pursuing. First, the theory predicts
that reducing dependence on the United States would be a political priority for British elites, who should have viewed nuclear weapons as a useful tool in pursuing this goal (leading Britain to use its nuclear weapons to facilitate independence). Second, the theory suggests that maintaining the British position in the face of decline would have been a political priority for British elites, who should have viewed nuclear weapons as a useful tool in pursuing this goal (leading Britain to use nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering of existing allies and steadfastness in response to challenges). This leads to Hypotheses 7–8.

\[ H_{\text{Britain}}^7 \]: British elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a solution to the problem of dependence on the United States.

\[ H_{\text{Britain}}^8 \]: British elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a tool that would help them maintain their position in international politics.

Table 3.1 summarizes the hypotheses, and where I look in the historical record for evidence to confirm or reject the hypotheses. The following sections examine whether these predictions are borne out in the historical record.

### 3.3 British foreign policy around the point of acquisition

This section asks whether British foreign policy behavior changed in 1955 in the way the theory suggests. I look for evidence of each of the six foreign policy behaviors in both the period before and after Britain acquired a deliverable capability in 1955, and assess whether changes in the scale or nature of the behavior occurred.

#### 3.3.1 Aggression and expansion

There is little evidence that Britain began behaving more aggressively in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Figure 3.2 shows the militarized interstate disputes involving Britain over time (with the disputes other countries were involved with in gray, to provide context with which the British trend over time can be compared). If Britain were to become more aggressive in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, we would expect to see Britain involved in more conflict
in the period after acquiring a deliverable capability. As can be seen, Britain was involved in between two and three Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) per year on average, but this did not change substantially after 1955 (restricting the sample to MIDs in which Britain was the revisionist power does not change the results). In the ten years preceding 1955, Britain engaged in an average of 2.6 MIDs per year, and in the ten years following, Britain engaged in an average of 2.3 MIDs per year.\textsuperscript{25} While Britain was involved in more militarized disputes than most countries in the world (as would be expected given the British position in the world and its relatively powerful conventional military), there is little evidence of a substantial effect of nuclear acquisition of British conflict patterns. If anything, the number of MIDs involving Britain may have decreased slightly after 1955.

Britain's only enduring rivalry over the period was with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{26} Another indication of aggression would be if Britain became substantially more willing in the post-1955 era to aggress against the Soviet Union or its proxies. There is little evidence that this was the


---

### Table 3.1: Summary of predictions in the British case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Where to look for evidence</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence from the United States</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering of junior allies</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Britain should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in response to challenges</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Britain should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion</td>
<td>British behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>3.3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. British elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a solution to the problem of dependence on the United States</td>
<td>British elite thinking about nuclear weapons</td>
<td>3.4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. British elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as helping them maintain their position in international politics</td>
<td>British elite thinking about nuclear weapons</td>
<td>3.4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.2: Militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) involving Britain over time

Britain remained committed to resisting encroachment by the Soviet Union—particularly in the Middle East where Britain remained (for the time being) the dominant power. And, as I discuss below in Section 3.3.3 Britain became more willing to stand up to challenges to its position in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable capability. This behavior did on occasion lead to tension with the Soviet Union, most notably during the Suez Crisis, in which the Soviet Union made clear threats to the United Kingdom, with Soviet Prime Minister Bulganin sending messages to both British and French and governments indicating Soviet “determination to use force to crush the aggressors and to restore peace to the East. We hope you will show the necessary prudence and will draw from this the appropriate conclusions.” However, in these cases the British were responding to what they perceived to be serious challenges to the status quo (in the case of Suez, the nationalization of the Suez Canal), and so these behaviors are more accurately seen as instances of steadfastness than aggression.

Similarly, Britain did not expand its interests over this time period. As T.C.G. James’ secret

---

internal history states, “the period [from 1956] was one which saw little change in the objectives of British defence commitments outside Europe.” As I discuss in detail below, Britain sought to use nuclear weapons to bolster its existing allies in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, but did not seek to significantly widen British commitments. Indeed, and as I discuss in more detail below, the goal of such efforts was to reduce the cost of British commitments: Britain hoped to use nuclear weapons to place increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons at the expense of conventional forces, and thereby reduce the cost of maintaining British commitments. Nor did Britain initiate any new rivalries over the period. Little consideration was given to massively expanding the British position in the world, and such an effort would have been extremely foolish for a declining state such as Britain to engage in.

3.3.2 Bolstering

At the point at which Britain acquired a deliverable nuclear capability, Britain’s military and economic power was far less than that of the Soviet Union and United States. Despite this, Britain’s commitment to continue to play a major role on the world stage remained, and of the total of 11 British Army divisions, 10 were stationed outside the United Kingdom, spread across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This section examines the three major alliance networks of which Britain was a part: the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Asia, the Baghdad Pact in the Middle East, and NATO in Europe. In each of these alliances, beginning in around 1955, Britain sought to use nuclear weapons to “bridge the gap” between the extensive political commitments that Britain had adopted and Britain’s declining conventional military and financial resources with which to meet those commitments. Thus, despite the ongoing effort to reduce defense expenditures, Britain engaged in bolstering of existing allies in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Further, this section lays out evidence that nuclear weapons facilitated this bolstering behavior.

29. Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics.”
31. Ibid., 38.
Asia

From the early 1950s, Britain had sought to formalize the many alliance relationships it had in Asia, with the hope of better protecting British interests in the region, including maintaining the security of Malaysia and Singapore, and protecting the British position in Hong Kong. Britain had been excluded from joining the 1951 Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), but succeeded in September 1954 when the United States, United Kingdom, France, Pakistan, Thailand, the Phillipines, Australia and New Zealand created SEATO.32

After the establishment of SEATO in 1954, South-East Asian states made a number of attempts to persuade British planners to confirm the details of British conventional deployments to the alliance. This created “something of a dilemma” for British planners.33 The alliance was perceived to serve an important strategic and political purpose, but Eden and other senior leaders were unable to commit large numbers of conventional forces to the region beyond those fighting in Malaya (now Malaysia), and the alliance lacked the ability to meet a large scale Chinese offensive with conventional forces. The United States was also unwilling to make any firm commitment of forces to the defense of South East Asia (and certainly not forward-deployed forces as in NATO), or even to participate in an institutional architecture that would facilitate military planning for the region.34 SEATO member states were well aware, and uneasy, about the alliance’s apparent “lack of substance.” Australia, for example, increasingly “believed that London assigned the area a very low priority and was preparing to cut back its conventional forces in Malaya.”35 Both Britain and the United States were aware of these concerns, with a State Department official telling the British embassy in Washington that “we must breathe life into the blue baby [SEATO].”36

Nuclear weapons offered a solution to this problem, and were thus used to underpin the credibility of this alliance. As Matthew Jones argues, military and political elites in London

32. Ibid., 47–48.
35. Ibid., 652.
and Washington had resolved both “that if SEATO was going to have any real teeth, they would need to be nuclear ones” and that “those teeth would need to be much more visible to the other members of the alliance.” British elites were explicit that the primary purpose of nuclear deployments would be to bolster British allies: one Ministry of Defence official wrote that the benefits of deploying nuclear assets to Asia were “in retaining our influence in the Far East and the confidence of our Commonwealth and Asian friends.”

Nuclear weapons, therefore, became increasingly prominent in British thinking about military strategy in Asia. The British Joint Planning Staff emphasized that “the use of nuclear air power must form the basis of our strategy [in the Far East]. Care should be taken, therefore, to avoid undue emphasis being placed on the land campaign in the development of a strategic concept for the region.” The British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) concluded that tactical nuclear air power would allow Britain to “eliminate” the Chinese ability to launch an offensive. And in late 1955, the Chiefs of Staff endorsed the JIC’s conclusion: “In the case of a Chinese Communist advance, the early delivery of nuclear weapons...would so delay the advance that the overt threat to Malaya would be very small.” As Jones argues, “as dissatisfaction within SEATO grew...Britain moved toward a more overt acceptance of nuclear planning assumption that would reassure their allies without producing a greater call on their resources...the imperatives of demonstrating SEATO’s utility to its more sceptical Asian members led to the formal acceptance that nuclear weapons would need to play a central part in the defence planning of the alliance.” In February 1956 the Joint Planning Staff concluded that they “considered it...essential that the future strategy for the defence of the treaty area...should be based on the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used by SEATO,” and that “large scale reductions in our conventional forces would not be possible unless...it may be assumed that nuclear weapons would be used.”

At the SEATO Council meeting in March 1956, it was agreed that nuclear weapons would

---

41. Ibid., 311.
43. Ibid., 653.
be incorporated into SEATO military planning assumptions. In the same year, the JIC stated that “nuclear counter measures will be available” for the defense of British interests in Asia. Britain thus began to draw up plans for nuclear deployments to the region, and in February 1957, Britain announced publicly that the British contribution to the defense of the treaty area would indeed include nuclear-capable delivery platforms, including V-bombers flown from the UK, and carrier-borne aircraft based in Far Eastern waters. Such plans appear to have worked as intended by facilitating the withdrawal of conventional forces while simultaneously reassuring allies. For example, when Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies visited London in 1957 to be briefed on the implications of the Sandys White Paper (which included plans to reduce British deployments in Malaya from 20,000 to 11,000) he was mollified by plans to deploy three squadrons of V-bombers to the region if a major threat appeared imminent.

Thus, Britain used its nuclear weapons to bolster alliances in Asia which were becoming increasingly hard to make credible with purely conventional commitments. In doing so, Britain aimed to maintain its position in Asia while nonetheless cutting the costs associated with its commitments in the region.

Middle East

Britain remained the most militarily powerful state in the Middle East for much of the 1950s, but British conventional capabilities were increasingly stretched and economically unsustainable as the defense of western Europe became a relatively higher priority for British planners than the Middle East. The British were well aware of these trends. A 1950 report for the Chiefs of Staff acknowledged “the little the United Kingdom can actually do to protect the Middle East,” and in 1952, the Chiefs of Staff informed the cabinet that “we are faced with the fact that the United Kingdom cannot afford to maintain its present forces [in the Middle East].”

47. “Review of Middle East Policy and Strategy: Report by the Chiefs of Staff (September 15, 1950),” Appendix II, in United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA) CAB 21/2088, COS(50) 363.
In April 1955 Britain sought to reinforce its position in the Middle East by joining the Baghdad Pact. The British viewed the Pact as a “vehicle for the maintenance of [British] influence throughout the area.” Britain believed the Pact served multiple ends—to protect the Northern limits of the Middle East against the Soviet Union; to limit Nasser’s influence throughout the Middle East; to constrain increasing American influence in Iraq; and protect British oil investments in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

Britain could not, however, afford to contribute large numbers of conventional forces to the alliance, and “there was a general appreciation in British defence circles that a conventional defence of the Middle East in global war was a far too difficult and expensive an enterprise.” A Joint Planning Staff paper in 1956 concluded that “[w]e have neither the men nor the money in current circumstances to make the Baghdad Pact effective militarily.” As in Asia, British reticence to commit conventional forces caused unease among allies, with the Joint Planning Staff noting that “it required a lot of talking to persuade the other planners that the United Kingdom was not trying to avoid helping in the land battle.” Nuclear weapons, as they had in Asia, provided a solution to this fundamental political problem of maintaining alliance credibility while reducing conventional force commitments. Minister of Defence Harold Macmillan discussed the utility of nuclear weapons for defending the Middle East explicitly in 1955, when he stated in the House of Commons that “the power of interdiction upon invading columns by nuclear weapons gives a new aspect altogether to strategy, both in the Middle East and the Far East.”

Accordingly, nuclear weapons became increasingly prominent in British plans for the defense of the Middle East. In 1955, a British planning document confirmed that Britain planned to launch nuclear attacks from the Middle East, and in 1956 the Joint Planning Staff wrote that “the main United Kingdom contribution to the military effectiveness of the


52. Ibid., 45.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 40.
Baghdad Pact will be nuclear interdiction.” 55 Although the British Middle East Land Forces were theoretically able to support operations, “Baghdad Pact planners were informed that the peacetime deployment of those force precluded any more than a small proportion of them being able to participate in the land defence of the Pact area. Consequently—and this was the crux of the matter—Britain’s contribution to the Pact defence would mainly be in the realm of strategic and tactical nuclear delivery capabilities.” 56 As both Navias and Baylis argue, Britain sought to use its nuclear weapons as its primary contribution to the Baghdad Pact in 1955, seeking to “avoid large force commitments through a stress on the centrality of massive retaliation.” 57 James’ internal history makes clear that “nuclear strike was seen as the main component of the assistance which could be offered [to the Baghdad Pact].” 58 There was ambiguity about exactly how and under what circumstances Britain would conduct nuclear operations in support of the Baghdad Pact. 59 However, Britain was not squeamish about deploying nuclear assets close to the Middle East. As early as November 1955, Wynn’s internal history states that “the plans were for two [British] Canberra B2 squadrons” to be deployed in the Middle East Air Force, and “it was considered that they would then, or shortly afterwards, be capable of carrying nuclear weapons.” 60 Although initially their role was intended to be a conventional one (though whether or not the Soviets were aware of this is unclear), by 1960 Canberra squadrons based in Cyprus had an unambiguous nuclear strike capability. 61

As Britain acquired a deliverable nuclear capability, it thus sought to shore up its increasingly shaky alliance commitments in the Middle East, much as it had in Asia. Nuclear weapons allowed Britain to bolster its allies in the Middle East and maintain its position and influence “on the cheap.” 62

---

56. Navias, *Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning*, 44.
59. Ibid., 20.
60. Wynn, *The RAF Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Forces*, 125-126.
61. Ibid.
Europe

Britain’s most important alliance, of course, was NATO—the alliance which played an important role in providing for Britain’s own security. Here too, Baylis argues that “the same pattern can be discerned...in the mid-1950s,” with Britain seeking to use nuclear weapons to strengthen the credibility of NATO while reducing British conventional and financial commitments to the alliance.63 In addition, Britain showed greater independence from the United States, as predicted by Hypothesis 2, by seeking to change NATO strategy in Europe against American wishes.

The MC 48 strategic concept that NATO adopted in 1954 caused unease in London because of its vision of a “two-phase war” in which conventional forces would fight “broken backed” in the aftermath of a thermonuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and United States.64 Britain was unwilling to make the conventional commitments necessary to make such plans credible, and, much as it had in Asia and the Middle East, Britain argued that its nuclear weapons allowed it to place less emphasis on its conventional forces. In 1954, the cabinet agreed that “an assurance that we would maintain the present fighting capacity of the United Kingdom forces on the Continent...left open the possibility of some reductions in numbers if in the course of time development of new weapons made it possible to maintain the present fighting capacity of our forces on the Continent with fewer men,” and this qualification was subsequently added to the 1954 Paris agreement.65 By the end of 1955, “British military policy-makers were well on their way to shifting the focus from conventional to nuclear forces.”66

Britain began to increasingly voice disapproval of NATO’s current strategy, and sought to encourage NATO as a whole to change its posture during the Annual Review process. As Eden argued in a letter to Eisenhower in July 1956, “a ‘shield’ of conventional forces is still required: but it is no longer our principal military protection. Need it be capable of fighting a major land battle? Its primary military function seems now to be to deal with any local infiltration,

63. Baylis, Ambiguity and Deterrence, 230.
64. Ibid.
65. Navias, Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning, 52.
66. Ibid., 55.
to prevent external intimidation and to enable aggression to be identified.”  

Eden’s vision, shared by the Joint Planning Staff to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, was that conventional forces would not be expected to fight a major war, but to “meet limited incursions and identify aggression.” Similarly, Defence Secretary Monckton “rejected the idea that the West needed to build up conventional forces large enough to hold an all-out attack by the Soviet Union.”  

The Americans did not appreciate the British campaign for a major change in NATO’s strategy, expressing concern that British conventional withdrawals would cause other NATO members to make similar withdrawals and undermine German efforts to develop its own conventional capabilities. Secretary of State Dulles was clear that “we find unacceptable any proposal which implies the adoption of a NATO strategy of total reliance on nuclear retaliation.” And in a meeting with Macmillan, he was equally blunt: “no unsound strategic concept should be forced on NATO to meet financial problems.”  

The British desire to place greater reliance on nuclear weapons and reduce conventional forces accordingly clashed with American preferences. Ultimately, NATO did not change its strategy in accordance with British preferences, but nor did the British give way to American preferences. Britain did reduce its own conventional commitment at the NATO Council meeting in December of 1956. Further reductions were made over the next few years, with Britain gaining NATO acceptance for a reduction of 31,500 men (leaving around 63,000) by April 1958.  

As with its alliances in Asia and the Middle East, Britain’s strategic ambition and political commitments to Europe had not changed, but the conventional commitment it was willing to make had been reduced: “The Army’s tasks, within and outside Europe, remained; it simply had less with which to meet them.” Overall, therefore, British policy toward NATO represents the British using nuclear weapons to facilitate a combination of bolstering and independence from the United States.

---

70. Ibid., 63.
Conclusion

The same pattern was observed across Britain's most important alliances in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. In 1955, as Britain came into possession of a deliverable nuclear capability, Britain sought to use its nuclear weapons as a bedrock upon which to bolster its relationships in Asia and the Middle East. Britain used nuclear weapons to increase alliance credibility while reducing British expenditures and conventional commitments to those alliances. In NATO, Britain sought to pursue much the same strategy, but ran into American opposition that hindered British efforts to persuade the alliance as a whole to move in the direction that Britain sought. Overall, in line with Hypothesis 3, Britain appears to have used its nuclear weapons to bolster existing allies. In doing so, Britain sought to maintain its position in international politics and delay political retrenchment for longer than would have otherwise been possible. As James' secret internal history states: "Overall, no overseas commitments had been dropped, but reductions in the level of military support were in prospect and the RAF [the service with the ability to deliver nuclear weapons] was seen as having a major part to play in offsetting their effect."74

3.3.3 Independence, steadfastness, and compromise

To assess whether Britain exhibited greater levels of independence, steadfastness, and compromise, in the aftermath of acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, I examine British behavior in a series of crises in which Britain was challenged by other states between 1950 and 1960. Because Hypothesis 4 anticipates Britain using nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness when challenged, we should expect to see Britain respond more forcefully to challenges after 1955. I examine British responses to crises in the Middle East for three reasons. First, over this period the British position in the Middle East endured numerous challenges. Examining how Britain responded to these challenges offers us a number of crises in a reasonably narrow window before and after nuclearization, thus holding a range of factors constant and allowing for greater internal validity. Second, the Middle East was a region in which U.S. and British

74. James, Defence Policy and the Royal Air Force, 44.
preferences differed substantially. As a result, examining crises in the Middle East allows us to assess whether Britain became less deferential to American policy preferences and willing to respond to challenges more independently of the United States, as Hypothesis 2 would suggest. Third, I use the Middle East because Britain was the dominant power in the Middle East in the early 1950s and determined to retain its position.\textsuperscript{75} Any change in behavior associated with nuclear weapons cannot, therefore, be attributed to conventional weakness or revisionism, as Kapur’s theory of strategic pessimism would suggest.

I examine Britain’s response to six challenges to its position: the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) by Mossadegh in 1951, efforts by Nasser to eject the British from Suez from 1952-1954, the Saudi occupation of Buraimi in 1952, the Suez Crisis in 1956, and subsequent crises in Oman and Jordan. I show that before acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, Britain was extremely wary of responding to challenges with force without the support of the United States, and British responses were characterized by compromise and deference to U.S. preferences. After 1955, Britain became more willing to use force unilaterally, paid less attention to American preferences, and was less inclined to compromise. Britain, therefore, exhibited significantly greater levels of independence, steadfastness, and a reduced inclination to compromise after acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability.

\textbf{Iran, 1951}

The nationalization of the AIOC by Mossadeq in 1951 had its roots in the early twentieth century. It was in 1914 that then First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill persuaded the British government to acquire a majority stake in what was then the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC).\textsuperscript{76} The Shah of Iran had negotiated a sixty-year agreement in 1933 on the terms on which APOC could extract and sell oil, but in the aftermath of World War II, changes in the British government’s tax and dividend policy led to an increasing disparity in the revenues that Britain and Iran received from Iranian oil sales.\textsuperscript{77} These disparities fueled

\textsuperscript{75.} Petersen, \textit{The Middle East Between the Great Powers}, xi.
\textsuperscript{76.} Steven G. Galpern, \textit{Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944-1971} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 84.
\textsuperscript{77.} Ibid., 87-88.
increasing Iranian anger and increasing resentment of the perceived British unwillingness to negotiate over the terms of the 1933 agreement. The British were concerned that any change in AIOC’s concession could damage the British economy, although the Foreign office acknowledged internally that the Iranians had “legitimate grievance[s].” In July 1949, the AIOC and Iran signed a new “supplemental” agreement that substantially increased Iranian oil revenues. However, increasing anti-British sentiment within Iran meant that the Iranian parliament never ratified the deal, and on April 28, 1950, the National Front’s Muhammad Mossadeq was elected to the country’s premiership. With anti-British sentiment at an all-time high and Iranian anger focused on Anglo-Iranian oil, even an offer of a fifty-fifty split by the AIOC was not enough. Mossadeq had declared that “the source of all the misfortunes of this tortured nation is only the oil company,” and by early May, Iran had nationalized its oil. The AIOC facilities in Iran, and the oil they extracted, now belonged to Iran.

The loss of Iranian oil was viewed as a disastrous development for Britain. In H.W. Brands’ words, the nationalization of AIOC “portended the apocalypse, to judge by the reactions of some in London.” For three months after the nationalization of AIOC, Britain seriously considered a military response. Ultimately, however, Britain decided against military intervention.

The decision not to undertake military action was not due to a lack of military options. While the British concluded that securing and holding Iran’s inland oil fields would be too challenging and beyond their military capabilities, a more limited plan—known as Plan Y—to occupy Abadan Island and retake control of the refinery was thought to be within British capabilities, although it would likely have involved some casualties. Indeed, plans were sufficiently advanced that Britain was in a position to launch an operation to seize Abadan Island within twelve hours of a decision to do so.

Nor was the decision to eschew a military solution made because Abadan was of limited

78. Galpern, Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East, 91.
80. Yergin, The Prize, 437; Galpern, Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East, 97.
82. Darwin, Britain and Decolonisation, 161; Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 29; Stephen Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and The Roots of Middle East Terror (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 3; Yergin, The Prize, 440.
importance to the British. On the contrary, the facility at Abadan was the world's largest oil refinery, Britain's largest single overseas investment, and had played a critical role in supporting the British war effort. As Britain sought to recover economically in the aftermath of the war, "sterling" or "dollar-free" oil extracted from British concessions was viewed as critically important in reducing the British dollar deficit. The British believed that the status of sterling was critical to Britain's international position, to which the dollar deficit on oil posed an important threat. Anglo-Iranian oil was at the center of this strategy to preserve the status of sterling. This was not only because AIOC was an entirely British entity, but also because the government itself had a 51 percent stake in the company (unlike other partly British-owned companies such as Royal Dutch-Shell). The money that Britain received from Iranian oil constituted 4% of Britain's entire balance of payments. British officials also saw Britain's response to the nationalization of AIOC as setting a critical precedent for how Britain would respond to violations of contracts around the world. It is no exaggeration to say that British officials in both the Treasury and at the Bank of England believed that the status of the pound as an international currency and Britain's position in the international system depended in important ways on British control over the production of Iranian oil. As Chancellor R.A. Butler stated in a meeting in November 1951, America needed to understand that Britain's "economic viability was at stake." The lack of a British military response to the nationalization of AIOC cannot, therefore be attributed of the limited importance of the Abadan facility.

Instead, Britain decided against a military response because the United States was strongly opposed to the use of force. For the United States, the dispute over AIOC was subordinate to the broader goal of keeping Iran out of the Soviet sphere, but in 1951 the United States felt too weak to provoke a dispute that might risk war with the Soviet Union. A 1921 Soviet-Iranian

86. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East*, 71.
87. Ibid., 107.
88. Ibid., 113.
89. Ibid., 19, 67, 81.
90. Minutes of meeting, November 1, 1951. UKNA FO 371/91608. Quoted in ibid., 127.
friendship pact gave the Soviet Union the authority to intervene if Iran were invaded, and the Americans therefore worried that British military action might trigger Soviet intervention. Potential British military action in Iran was, therefore, seen as at odds with American interests, and the United States sought to prevent it from happening. Secretary of State Acheson wrote that “[o]nly on invitation of the Iranian Government, or Soviet military intervention, or a Communist coup d’état in Tehran, or to evacuate British nationals in danger of attack could we support the use of military force.” And a paper was presented to the British ambassador stating that “We fully understand the importance of the AIOC to the UK economy...[Nonetheless,] we would be opposed to the adoption of ‘strong measures’ by the British...such as the manipulation into office of an Iranian Premier of UK choosing or the introduction of force or the threat of force.” Despite the fact that a diplomatic solution appeared unlikely, the Americans insisted that Britain forego military options.

Ultimately, for all the British huffing and puffing at the United States’ reticence to assist them, the British were not prepared to act alone. Attlee told the Cabinet that U.S. opposition to British action was decisive: “in view of the attitude of the United States Government, [he did not] think it would be expedient to use force to maintain the British staff in Abadan.” Attlee’s argument carried the day, with the Cabinet concluding that “in light of the United States attitude...force could not be used...We could not afford to break with the United States on an issue of this kind.”

In the absence of U.S. support for military action, Britain was forced to pursue a purely economic approach to dealing with Iran. In particular, Britain threatened to sue anyone who purchased Iranian oil, claiming that they were buying stolen goods. Foreign Secretary Eden, who would later adopt a very different approach in response to the Suez Crisis, was responsible for implementing this approach. Britain did, however, continue to try and persuade America

93. Ibid., 65-68.
95. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 29.
96. Ibid.
97. Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 19.
to act throughout 1952, but Truman again rejected British proposals to topple Mossadeq on the grounds that his ouster risked provoking a communist takeover in Iran.\(^{99}\) It was only with an increasingly favorable balance of power resulting from U.S. rearmament, combined with Eisenhower's accession to the White House, that U.S. policy changed, with the Secretary of State and the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) informing their British counterparts in early 1953 that the United States was ready to take action against Mossadeq.\(^{100}\) Thus, although Britain finally took part in covert action to remove Mossadeq, the episode demonstrated Britain's reliance on the United States as it responded to challenges to its position.\(^{101}\)

**Egypt, 1945-1954**

After 1945, as it had been prior to 1939, Egypt lay at the center of British strategy in the Middle East. In particular, the network of British bases in the Suez Canal Zone constituted a huge military investment with the ability to service and maintain an army of half a million men.\(^{102}\) Since 1869, the Canal had played a critical strategic role in linking Britain to its empire in India and East Asia; facilitating British trade with Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and in permitting the effective defense of the empire.\(^{103}\) Britain had occupied the Canal Zone since 1860, and its military significance was demonstrated in World War II, when the British defense at El Alamein ended the Axis threat to the Canal and, thus, to the Middle Eastern and Persian oil fields.\(^{104}\) The increasing amounts of Persian Gulf oil flowing through the Canal to Europe meant that the Canal remained of high strategic importance in the aftermath of World War II.

Increasing currents of Egyptian nationalism were challenging the British occupation of Suez, however. As soon as the war ended, Egypt requested negotiations to end Britain's military presence in the country. For Egyptian nationalists, the Suez Canal was a symbol of nineteenth century imperialism, and a potential source of significant revenues currently being collected by

---

100. Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, 4; Gavin, "Politics, Power and U.S. Policy in Iran." The relative importance of changes in the balance of power versus the change in presidential administrations in changing American policy is contested. See Gavin, "Politics, Power and U.S. Policy in Iran."
103. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East*, 142.
the British and other European shareholders in the Suez Canal Company. Britain was willing to withdraw significant forces from Suez, but only if British influence could be preserved and British access to the base during war could be guaranteed, something Nasser was unwilling to grant. Egyptian nationalism remained insufficient to enforce British withdrawal, but Britain was increasingly forced to expend military manpower and money defending the bases and protecting its own soldiers and civilians stationed there.

Despite Britain's continued military strength in the Middle East and the continued centrality of Egypt within British strategic thinking, the British strategy was to rely on the United States for support. Foreign Minister Anthony Eden "constantly sought to enlist American aid," while Churchill pursued the "continued bombardment of [Eisenhower with] letters and telegrams pleading for American aid and support," and his briefing papers argued for the necessity of "an agreed Anglo-U.S. policy...lack of positive support and affection of impartiality by either Power will be...exploited to the detriment of both."

The British pursued this strategy despite increasing awareness that the United States was moving away from the British position, and increasingly viewed supporting the British as inimical to American goals in the region. Many in the Eisenhower administration (particularly in the State Department) favored offering American support to the new Egyptian regime and had little inclination to help prop up Britain's empire. While Eisenhower himself held more pro-British views (despite some skepticism about the content of British policies), he too increasingly came to see Egypt as critical for strengthening the American position in the Middle East, at the expense of the British. In November 1953, the Americans attempted to use the threat of providing aid to Egypt to coerce the British into making concessions, with Dulles telling Eden that "time is fast running out." Ultimately, through the Spring of 1954, American pressure forced the British to make serious concessions to Egypt—agreeing to end British rule in the Sudan and ultimately agreeing to withdraw British troops from the Canal Zone over a period of 20 months without any guarantee that they could return in the event of

105. Yergin, The Prize, 463.
106. Darwin, Britain and Decolonisation, 121; Darwin, The Empire Project, 564.
108. Ibid., 14.
war. British leaders blamed Egyptian intransigence on the lack of American support they were receiving. Ultimately, however, the British were unwilling to act independently of the United States, and were ultimately “brought to heel” by the Americans. 

**Buraimi, 1952-1954**

Buraimi, a small and remote oasis located at the south-eastern tip of the Arabian peninsula, was nonetheless strategically significant. Buraimi offered the possibility of new oil reserves, and its location represented a strategically valuable crossroads: whoever controlled it controlled approaches to both Muscat and Oman. Saudi leaders, including the King, Ibn Saud, were well aware of the benefits associated with controlling Buraimi, and in 1952 sent Saudi forces to occupy the oasis with the support of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO). British officials viewed this a significant challenge to their position in the Persian Gulf. Particularly in the aftermath of the nationalization of AIOC, the Saudi occupation of Buraimi represented a further nail in the coffin of Britain’s position in the Middle East. Worse still, the Saudis were acting with the implicit approval of the United States.

Despite this, Britain encouraged caution. The Sultan of Muscat and Oman raised a substantial force with which to evict the Saudi forces, but the British persuaded him to pursue a diplomatic solution to persuade the Saudis to leave Buraimi. In doing so, the British sought American support. One of Churchill’s briefing papers emphasized the extent to which the British saw the themselves as ineluctably tied to the Americans: “each power [the United Kingdom and United States] must support the other fully and be seen by all to do so. Lack of positive support and an affectation of impartiality by either power will be interpreted as disagreement with the other and exploited to the detriment of both.”

---


to bring U.S. political and diplomatic support to bear against the Saudis, they agreed to a
"Standstill Agreement" with the Saudis, by which both sides would remain in their current
positions and avoid taking further actions that might threaten each other or prejudice a future
settlement over the status of Buraimi.\textsuperscript{115}

The Standstill Agreement did not last long, with Britain abrogating it in response to
perceived Saudi violations. Encouraged by the United States, Britain and Saudi Arabia re-
opened negotiations on an arbitration agreement that yielded little progress.\textsuperscript{116} When Eden
took charge of the Foreign Office in 1953, he asked why Saudi forces had not yet been evicted
from Buraimi and was told that the British had been reluctant to use force while they required
American support in Egypt and Iran.\textsuperscript{117} Britain's ability to take action was, therefore, heavily
constrained by British dependence on the United States.

The disagreement continued, however. Britain insisted that British companies continue their
operations in the disputed area, while Saudi Arabia (backed by ARAMCO, and thus, implicitly,
by the United States), demanded that Britain cease any actions until the case was settled.\textsuperscript{118}
As tensions rose through 1954, ARAMCO decided to enter the disputed area in order to lay
claim to the territory. Dulles requested that the British ignore the incursion, which did not
occur close to British operations, but the British refused to do so and ARAMCO pulled its
personnel out of the contested area on June 8, 1954. The following month, Churchill travelled
to Washington over Eden's objections with the aim of securing an agreement. Eden announced
that Britain and Saudi Arabia would solve the dispute via arbitration, a commitment also made
by Churchill in a meeting with Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{119} A neutral zone was established to avoid clashes
between ARAMCO and British companies, and Saudi forces left Buraimi in August 1954.\textsuperscript{120}

Overall, Britain's responses to challenges to its position in the Middle East prior to acquiring
a deliverable nuclear capability suggest that the British found it difficult to respond to challenges
independently of the United States.

\textsuperscript{115} Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East," 74.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{117} Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 42.
\textsuperscript{118} Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East," 77.
\textsuperscript{119} Ashton, Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser, 75; Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers,
47.
\textsuperscript{120} Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East," 83.
Buraimi, 1955

Once Britain obtained a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, Britain began to respond more decisively and independently to challenges to its position. Eden stated the change in British strategy bluntly in a cabinet meeting in October 1955: “Our interests in the Middle East were greater than those of the United States...and our experience in the area was greater than theirs. We should not therefore allow ourselves to be restricted overmuch by reluctance to act without full American concurrence and support. We should frame our own policy in the light of our interests in the area and get the Americans to support it to the extent we could induce them to do so.”

Britain’s newfound independence was demonstrated in responding to challenges in Buraimi, Suez, Jordan, and Oman.

At the point at which Britain acquired nuclear weapons in 1955, Britain was in the midst of arbitration with Saudi Arabia over control of the Buraimi Oasis. In the eyes of the British, however, the Saudis were undermining the agreed-upon arbitration process. For example, the Saudi representative on the commission attempted to instruct witnesses appearing before the commission, causing the British representative to resign. With the arbitration commission disbanded, Britain dramatically shifted their approach. In contrast to the British strategy since 1952 of seeking American political and diplomatic assistance and pursuing a diplomatic solution, Britain instead pursued a unilateral, military approach aimed at changing the facts on the ground in a fait accompli. Thus, despite the Foreign Office telling Eden two years earlier that Britain could not take military action in Buraimi because of American opposition, British forces quickly evicted the Saudis from Buraimi and unilaterally returned the boundaries to the positions they had held prior to the 1952 Saudi occupation.

This action represented a significant change in strategy. However, even more notable than the fact that British military action occurred was that Britain undertook it without either consulting or informing the Americans. Instead, after Eden had announced in parliament that action was being taken, the British cabled Washington to let them know that: “The Americans

121. Petersen, *The Middle East Between the Great Powers*, 52.
122. Petersen, “Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East,” 84.
must also realize that for the United Kingdom the issues are vital. We cannot allow this primitive and expansionist power to seize control of sources from which we draw an essential part of our fuel. Unlike the United States we have no indigenous reserves and in the last resort, we must act firmly to preserve our lifeline.”124

This “brazen piece of unilateralism” caused “considerable consternation” in Washington, with Under Secretary of State Hoover “berating the British ambassador for the lack of consultation.”125 Dulles also vociferously protested the reoccurrence of Buraimi to the British foreign office, with the British officer in charge of the Middle East section of the Foreign Office writing in his diary that: “Today we were thrown into a rage with the Americans upon receiving two notes or messages [from the Americans]—one telling us that we better go back to arbitration on Buraimi...and the other practically ordering us to call off the Sultan of Muscat’s impending clear-up of the rebellious Imam of Oman...[Under Secretary of State] Kirkpatrick is breathing fire.”126 Indeed, U.S. displeasure was sufficient that Eisenhower raised the issue personally with Eden during a state visit to Washington in early 1956, acknowledging Britain’s legal claims to Buraimi but arguing that world public opinion thought “that the whole Arab peninsula belonged, or ought to belong, to King Saud.”127 Despite this pressure, Eden refused to give ground.128

The reoccupation of Buraimi indicated an increase both in British independence from the United States and in British steadfastness in responding to challenges, and set a precedent for how Britain would act in response to challenges to its position in the Middle East. As Petersen argues, “thereafter, increasingly, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet regarded military force as the solution to Great Britain’s problems in the Middle East.”129

127. Ibid.
Suez, 1956

It was during the Suez Crisis of 1956, however, that Britain’s newfound independence was most dramatically demonstrated. As with the nationalization of AIOC, the Suez Crisis involved the nationalization of an asset viewed as critical to Britain’s economic and political status. Unlike in the case of the AIOC, however, Britain was prepared to act militarily without the support of (and, indeed, despite the opposition of) the United States.

As discussed above, the Suez Canal had long been viewed as critical to British security, and negotiations over the status of the Canal had been a major problem for post-war British foreign policy, and a settlement had been negotiated with Nasser in 1954. This settlement did not last long, however, with Nasser nationalizing the Canal in July 1956 in order to raise funds for the Aswan High Dam. As with the case of Anglo-Iranian oil, the nationalization of the Suez Canal was viewed as a crucial challenge to British interests. Concerns about Britain’s future ability to trade through the Canal further eroded confidence in the pound and made a second devaluation of the currency in less than a decade a frightening possibility, while senior policymakers feared that Nasser’s rising power and fervent anti-British nationalism would lead him to turn other Middle East oil producing states against Britain and use the Suez Canal as a spigot with which to turn on and off the supply of oil to Western Europe.

Indeed, in many ways the extent to which British interests were at stake over the Suez Canal were similar to those at stake over Anglo-Iranian oil. Both were challenges to the British position that would potentially undermine British standing and prestige; both threatened access to British oil holdings and thus threatened the British balance of payments and the status of sterling; and both threatened to set a precedent for how Britain would respond to future nationalist challenges to its position.

As in the case of Anglo-Iranian oil, the United States was opposed to any military action by Britain to force Nasser to give up the canal. Dulles had reassured the British and French foreign ministers in the aftermath of nationalization that “a way had to be found to make Nasser

130. Galpern, Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East, 142-143.
132. Yergin makes this comparison explicit, arguing that “a Nasser victory in Egypt might have had the same kind of repercussions as a Mossadegh victory in Iran would have had.” ibid.
disgorge” the canal, but the diplomatic strategies they proposed appeared to the British more as efforts to forestall direct action than strategies likely to succeed.133 Indeed, U.S. opposition to military action was communicated directly and explicitly to the British. Eisenhower had communicated to Eden as early as July 31 the “unwisdom even of contemplating the use of military force,” and on September 9 he told Eden that military action “might cause a serious misunderstanding between our two countries.”134 The Americans were concerned that any military action would play into the hands of both the Soviet Union and Nasser: turning Nasser into an anti-imperialist hero throughout the Arab world and pushing him into the hands of the Soviet Union.135 Britain was under no illusions about U.S. opposition: British policymakers were not only well aware that the United States would not condone action, but as a memorandum to Foreign Secretary Lloyd made clear, “Britain would have little or no international support...[and using] military force would cause a tremendous strain on the British economy.” Chancellor of the Exchequer Macmillan also warned of the danger of taking military action and warned that in an extended crisis, the British currency would come under significant strain due to limited British reserves.136

Despite a full awareness of these challenges, and in striking contrast to British behavior in the case of Anglo-Iranian oil, Britain quickly committed to military action in response to the nationalization of the Canal. At a meeting in 10 Downing Street shortly after Nasser’s announcement of nationalization, Eden made it “clear that military action would have to be taken and that Nasser would have to go. Nasser could not be allowed ‘to have his hand on our windpipe’,” and he subsequently informed U.S. Under Secretary of State Robert Murphy that Suez was a test that “[could be met only by the use of force.”137 On October 24, 1956, senior British, French and Israeli officials (including the British and French foreign Ministers, and the Israeli Prime Minister) met secretly outside Paris. Agreement was reached for Israel to launch an attack across the Sinai Peninsula toward the Suez Canal. Britain and France would

133. Yergin, The Prize, 466.
134. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 47; Ashton, Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser, 88; Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 68.
136. Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 82.
137. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 46-47; Ashton, Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser, 85.
then make an ultimatum stating that they would protect the Canal if fighting continued, and then
 invade when the fighting failed to stop. The goal was to seize the Canal and hopefully to supplant Nasser as a side effect.¹³⁸

On October 29, the Israelis launched their invasion, with Britain and France issuing their ultimatum the following day. On October 31, Britain began bombing Egyptian airfields, and on November 5 British and French forces began their assault on the Canal Zone. The invasion came as a complete surprise to the Americans. Indeed, Eisenhower was sufficiently enraged by the British betrayal that he berated on the phone one of Eden’s aides thinking it was the Prime Minister and then hung up before the mistake could be corrected.¹³⁹ By November 6, however, the British objectives had already been lost: Nasser had obstructed the Canal by sinking ships filled with rocks and cement, and the British goal of unrestricted use of the Canal was thus gone. Britain and France agreed to a ceasefire, but the United States now demanded a complete withdrawal of their forces. The result was a disastrous operation that was ultimately curtailed by U.S. economic coercion, including the large-scale selling of sterling by the Federal Reserve, and Soviet threats.¹⁴⁰

While a detailed examination of outcome of the Suez Crisis is not necessary for the questions examined here (what is important for testing the theory is how the British responded to the challenge of nationalization, not the overall outcome of the crisis), it is worth noting that the fact that Britain was ultimately humiliated by the United States does not undermine the claim that Britain exhibited greater independence than would have been expected in the pre-nuclear era. In comparison to crises in the pre-nuclear era, such as the nationalization of the AIOC, the British response in Suez exhibited far less concern regarding American policy preferences and a greater willingness to stand firmly in defending challenges to the status quo. The British response is thus indicative of greater independence from the United States, regardless of the fact that the United States was ultimately able to successfully deploy economic coercion against the British.

¹³⁸. Yergin, The Prize, 471.
¹³⁹. Ibid., 472.
¹⁴⁰. Pierre, Nuclear Politics, 97; Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 62-63; Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 94.
Post-Suez: Oman and Jordan

In the aftermath of Suez, the conventional wisdom is that Britain shrunk, humiliated, away from the world stage and what remained of its empire. The Times’ obituary of Eden in 1977 described him as “the last Prime Minister to believe that Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not.” This position has been echoed in a large body of historical scholarship depicting the Suez crisis as a decisive turning point in British history. Similarly, it is argued that Britain subjugated its nuclear weapons to the United States, and that after 1958 Britain no longer possessed an independent nuclear deterrent.

It is true that Britain became increasingly dependent on the United States for missile technologies, and that British strategic targeting became increasingly co-ordinated with NATO. Nonetheless, Britain “made sure it...retained control” over its deployed forces, and Britain “retained the right to launch the missiles independently of NATO authorization if the British national interest warrant[ed] such action.” Prime Minister Macmillan was clear in articulating the need for “a deterrent influence independent of the United States,” even as targeting and technological co-operation with the United States grew stronger. Similarly, more recent historical scholarship argues that British independence persisted even in the aftermath of Suez. Britain continued to respond to challenges to its position and was “prepared neither to relinquish its residual interests in the region, nor become subservient to the United States.” As Ashton argues, “the British were resolved to pursue the promotion of their interests through the Baghdad Pact with even greater vigour after the Suez debacle, and were certainly not ready to cast off any mantle.” And, indeed, Britain continued to act unilaterally in the region when

141. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 67.
143. Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era, 3, fn. 3.
146. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 67.
it felt its interests were challenged, often “with little regard for American policy.”

First, Britain intervened unilaterally in Oman in 1957 in response to a request from Sultan Said, who was battling the Saudi-backed Ghalib bin Ali. The United States had significant concerns about the British intervention, with Dulles informing the President of his “concern that it [British intervention] could not be quickly wound up as a minor incident but that the Arab world would be drawn in in opposition to the UK, Nasser would have a new chance to assert Arab leadership, and we would be caught between our desire to maintain an influence in some of the Arab countries...and our desire to maintain good ties with the UK.” Nonetheless, the United States did not actively oppose the British intervention but was far from enthusiastic about the operation, and Dulles was irritated by the lack of consultation with the United States, with the deployment of British forces coming just days after he received assurances from the British that there “was no question of using British forces there.”

Second, Britain intervened in Jordan in the aftermath of the July 1958 coup in Iraq by pro-Nasser elements of the Iraqi army that brought down the Hashemite Royal Family. The coup was viewed as a significant blow to the British position in the Middle East, because Iraq stood at the heart of the Baghdad Pact, because the revolution appeared to threaten oil interests in Iraq, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf more broadly, and because of the possibility that the revolution might presage region-wide instability instigated by Nasser. The British did much to encourage American intervention in Lebanon, but were excluded from the planning for the operation by Eisenhower, who refused to make the operation a joint Anglo-American one. Instead, Britain sent its forces in Jordan in response to a Jordanian request for assistance. Again, while the Americans did not actively oppose the British intervention, they were not enthusiastic and refused to commit United States forces to the operation (although they did provide some logistical support), with Eisenhower stating that the United States should not “support Kings against their people,” and Dulles stating that the British had let themselves

148. Petersen, The Middle East Between the Great Powers, 216.
149. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 81.
150. Ibid.
152. Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 84.
be "foolishly exposed in Jordan"\textsuperscript{154} British intervention in Jordan thus further demonstrates Britain’s continued willingness to intervene militarily in countries without American assistance even in the aftermath of Suez.

Conclusion

British responses to challenges to its position in the Middle East are thus consistent with the predictions made above. After acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, Britain was able to respond to challenges to its position both more steadfastly and more independently of the United States, and showed less inclination to compromise.

3.4 British thinking about nuclear weapons

As seen, British foreign policy changed in 1955 in the ways anticipated by the theory of nuclear opportunism would suggest. However, are these changes in behavior consistent with the way British elites thought about the utility of nuclear weapons? If so, that would provide compelling evidence that the changes in British behavior were in fact caused by Britain’s nuclear weapons. Hypotheses 7 and 8 predict that British political and military elites should have viewed nuclear weapons in a specific way, and as a solution to specific problems. In particular, the theory predicts that British elites would view nuclear weapons as a solution to the problem of dependence on the United States, and as a tool that would help the British maintain their position in international politics despite ongoing British decline. This section examines speech evidence from British elites to assess these hypotheses.

3.4.1 Avoiding dependence on the United States

It was in the aftermath of World War II that Britain began to pursue nuclear weapons in earnest and in which the most comprehensive thinking took place about what nuclear weapons would offer Britain in the postwar world. But the British program had its origins during the war. It is worth examining British thinking about nuclear weapons during World War II, because at first

\textsuperscript{154} Smith, \textit{Ending Empire in the Middle East}, 85–86.
glance it would seem that the extensive Anglo-American cooperation in the Manhattan Project indicates that concern about British dependence on the United States was not a major theme in British thinking at the time.

In fact, even during the war, British concern about dependence on the United States was a key theme in British thinking. Indeed, the British had initially been reticent about cooperating with the United States for precisely this reason. The British had been the first government to identify the military potential of nuclear energy (after British officials learned of a memo written by two scholars at Birmingham University\textsuperscript{155} and a committee of scientists concluded in June 1941 that it would “be possible to make an effective uranium bomb” that would be “likely to lead to decisive results in the war.”\textsuperscript{156} Because the British were ahead of the Americans, Roosevelt wrote to Churchill in October 1941 proposing a joint venture, stating “it appears desirable that we should soon correspond...concerning the subject which is under study by your MAUD Committee...in order that any extended efforts may be coordinated or even jointly conducted.” Churchill only responded some two months later with a vague assurance of a general British willingness to collaborate with the Americans.\textsuperscript{157} British officials discussing the possibility of collaboration raised concerns about “the possibility of leakage of information to the enemy.”\textsuperscript{158} This was a largely instrumental excuse. The British believed (correctly, at that stage) that their bomb project was more advanced than the American one, and were concerned both about relying on American goodwill and the loss of scientific prestige and intellectual property of potentially significant commercial and strategic value. As Lord Cherwell, Churchill’s scientific advisor, had written, “However much I may trust my neighbour...I am very much averse to putting myself completely at his mercy.”\textsuperscript{159} As Pierre argues, “the primary motivation” behind British reluctance to collaborate with the United States was “the desire to remain independent by retaining complete control over their own

\textsuperscript{158} Pierre, \textit{Nuclear Politics}, 27.
\textsuperscript{159} Groom, \textit{British Thinking About Nuclear Weapons}, 3; Pierre, \textit{Nuclear Politics}, 28–29.
By the summer of 1942, the British had reluctantly come around to the necessity of collaboration. British scientists visiting America in 1942 realized that the Americans had overtaken the British in understanding the processes for producing fissile material, and concluded that these costs of collaboration were outweighed by the vast resources the Americans could dedicate to the project, and the greater protection that they could confer upon a weapons facility. In a memo to Churchill recommending pursuing a joint project, Sir John Anderson, the Home Secretary and the member of Churchill’s inner circle who oversaw the British participation in the Manhattan Project, acknowledged “the Americans have been applying themselves with enthusiasm and a lavish expenditure...in these circumstances I have come to the conclusion [that] work on the bomb project [should] be pursued as a combined Anglo-American effort. I make this recommendation with some reluctance, as I should have liked to have seen the work carried forward in this country. We must, however, face the fact that the pioneer work done in this country is a dwindling asset. We now have a real contribution to make to a ‘merger’. Soon we shall have little or none.” Thus, as Goldstein argues, the British “preference for continued nuclear independence faded only when the costs of autonomy in the desperate wartime years became clearly prohibitive.” Cooperation with the Americans was, for the British, the quickest path to possessing nuclear weapons under British control, and dependence on American efforts was never intended to be anything other than temporary. As Sir John Anderson argued in 1943: “we cannot afford after the war to face the future without this weapon and rely entirely on America.” Such concerns were magnified by American reticence about sharing information with the British. In January 1943, Churchill complained to Roosevelt at the Casablanca conference that nuclear cooperation appeared to have ended, and though Churchill obtained a commitment to share information from Roosevelt,  

the American bureaucracy continued to obstruct cooperation.\textsuperscript{166} British uneasiness about the lack of American cooperation meant that British officials always planned that in the post-war world they would undertake an independent nuclear weapons program.\textsuperscript{167}

British concern about dependence on the United States persisted in the post-war era for three main reasons. First, Britain was concerned that the American commitment to the defense of western Europe was less than absolute. As Prime Minister Attlee later argued, “there was always the possibility of their [the United States] withdrawing and becoming isolationist again. The manufacture of a British atom bomb was therefore at that stage essential.”\textsuperscript{168} These concerns were not fully alleviated by the United States clarifying and formalizing its commitments to western Europe: between 1948 and 1950, the United States committed significant resources to the rebuilding of western Europe through the Marshall Plan, oversaw the formation of NATO, and stationed nuclear bombers in East Anglia and U.S. ground forces in Europe. Debates in the United States showed that support for a substantial and enduring U.S. military commitment to western Europe was far from unanimous, and many of the cooperative exercises and organizations from World War II gradually disappeared.\textsuperscript{169} In the atomic realm, cooperation swiftly stopped after the war. Truman did not feel bound by the Hyde Park agreement that Roosevelt and Churchill had negotiated during the war which had guaranteed Britain post-war nuclear cooperation, and the passage of the McMahon Act in 1946 prohibited further such cooperation.\textsuperscript{170} Second, British planners were well aware that British and American interests diverged on important matters. As Groom puts it, “there were certain areas where U.S. and British policies diverged and where it was conceivable that what the British considered their vital interests would not be guaranteed by the United States.”\textsuperscript{171} Attlee himself made the same point later while retrospectively justifying the British pursuit of nuclear


\textsuperscript{167} Pierre, \textit{Nuclear Politics}, 59.

\textsuperscript{168} Rosecrance, \textit{Defence of the Realm}, 40.


\textsuperscript{170} Gowing and Arnold, \textit{Independence and Deterrence}, Vol. 1, 95–123.

\textsuperscript{171} Groom, \textit{British Thinking About Nuclear Weapons}, 44.
weapons, saying that “we couldn’t allow ourselves to be wholly in their hands.” Of course, it was widely known that there were plausible scenarios in which the United States would not be inclined to help Britain prop up its increasingly shaky hold on its colonies. However, even within potential war scenarios in which U.S. and British forces would be on the same side, British elites doubted that the United States fully shared British priorities. As Churchill argued in 1955, the British could “not be sure that in an emergency the resources of other powers would be planned exactly as we would wish, or that the targets which would threaten us most would be given what we consider the necessary priority in the first few hours. These targets might of such cardinal importance that it could really be a matter of life and death for us.” Third, British elites worried about entrapment and the compromises that dependence forced Britain to swallow: “London’s interest in maintaining good relations with...the United States, led it to agree to concessions in its economic and imperial policies, and also to back Washington during the Korean War.” The experience of the Korean war emphasized both that reliance on the United States could force Britain into conflicts it would not otherwise need to fight, and that the U.S. forces stationed in Britain could be a potentially high-priority target for Soviet forces if the conflict threatened to escalate to the nuclear level, and threatened to suck Britain into a potential U.S.-Soviet conflict. As Churchill stated in 1951: “we must not forget that by creating the American atomic base in East Anglia, we have made ourselves the target and perhaps the bull’s eye of a Soviet attack.”

As a result, it is unsurprising that British elites sought nuclear weapons as a solution to this problem. Although the final decision to acquire nuclear weapons was not made until 1947, vital decisions that put Britain firmly on the path to acquiring an independent nuclear capability had been made as early as December 1945. As the theory would expect, the desire for independence from the United States was a core reason given by British elites. In

---

176. Ibid., 89.
one meeting in 1946, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin declared that "we've got to have this [nuclear weapons]...I don't want any other Foreign Secretary of this country to be talked at by a Secretary of State in the United States as I have just had in my discussions with Mr. Byrnes. We have got to have this thing over here whatever the costs...we've got to have the bloody Union Jack flying on top of it." 177 In 1947, as the final decision to build the bomb was made, Bevin argued that "we could not afford to acquiesce in an American monopoly of this new development." 178 Prime Minister Attlee struck a similar tone, saying: "If we had decided not to have it, we would have put ourselves entirely in the hands of the Americans. That would have been a risk a British government should not take." 179 On other occasions, Attlee used more emotive language to communicate the same point, arguing that the Americans "were inclined to think they were the big boys and we were the small boys; we just had to show them they didn't know everything." 180 Such views were shared by British military leaders. The Chiefs of Staff argued that "it would be most unwise for the United Kingdom to be completely dependent on the United States and to accept the serious political disadvantages of not having a stock of atom bombs under its own control," and that it would not "appear compatible with with our status as a first-class power to depend on others for a weapon of this supreme importance." 181 Similarly, Sir John Slessor, the Chief of the Air Staff, advised that "we cannot possibly leave to an ally, however staunch and loyal, the monopoly of this instrument of such decisive importance." 182

Of course, nuclear weapons were never seen as a full substitute for the relationship with the United States, and Britain continued both to invest in the Anglo-American relationship, and to hope that the United States would ultimately protect the British if a major security threat emerged. Indeed, British officials believed that having nuclear weapons would allow Britain to gain greater benefits from their relationship with the United States, particularly in the realm of nuclear co-operation. As Lord Cherwell wrote in a memo to Churchill, "the possibility of

---
177. Ibid., 90.
178. Ibid.
181. “Defence Policy and Global Strategy: Report by the Chiefs of Staff (June 17, 1952),” in UKNA CAB 131/12, D(52) 26; Ruston, A Say in the End of the World, 95.
achieving full collaboration concerning plutonium and hydrogen bombs with the U.S. will vanish unless we have something [nuclear weapons] of our own to show.”183 But, as Goldstein argues, “at the same time, London worked hard to develop an independent capability to ensure British interests if deterrent-based security turned out to be a private good enjoyed exclusively by those countries possessing their own retaliatory forces.”184

From the earliest days of the British nuclear program, therefore, and despite the pressures of fighting a world war that forced Britain into reluctant nuclear cooperation with the United States, British elites clearly believed that nuclear weapons were a useful tool with which to reduce their dependence on the United States. It is therefore unsurprising that British became more willing to act independently of the United States in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition: this was an important reason that Britain had acquired nuclear weapons in the first place.

3.4.2 Maintaining Britain’s position

Similarly, the desire to maintain Britain’s position and status in international politics in the face of British decline regularly appears in British elites’ discussions of acquiring nuclear weapons. As early as 1941, British defense planners foresaw that “an atomic weapon would become a symbol of great power status that no state could risk being without.”185 Lord Cherwell, Churchill’s scientific advisor, advised him that “it is surely vital, unless we are to become a second-class nation armed with inferior weapons, that we should be in a position to make our own bombs.”186 As discussed above, these arguments combined with concerns about dependence on the United States. Sir John Slessor, quoted above, was not just worried about U.S. reliability, he also argued that “this instrument” (nuclear weapons) was necessary “if we want to remain a first-class power.”187 The historical literature on Britain’s nuclear weapons program also emphasizes that concerns about British status were a driving factor in determining British nuclear acquisition. Margaret Gowing, for example, writes that underpinning the British decision to build nuclear weapons were beliefs that “Britain as a great power must acquire all

185. Groom, British Thinking About Nuclear Weapons, 2.
major new weapons, a feeling that atomic weapons were a manifestation of the scientific and
technological superiority on which Britain’s strength, so deficient if measured in sheer numbers
of men, must depend.” Thus, British elites saw nuclear weapons as a solution to the problem
of maintaining Britain’s position and status in the world. These concerns and views were not
only found within the British policymaking elite. Even a 1946 report by the British Council of
Churches thought that any aspiring great power must possess the most formidable weapons
available: “An attempt in the atomic age to remain a Great Power while renouncing the use
of the atomic bomb would be equivalent to an attempt, in the naval age to wage naval war
without the use of capital ships.”

But exactly how did British elites think that nuclear weapons would help Britain to maintain
its position in the world? British elites believed they could use nuclear weapons to substitute
for conventional forces that were becoming increasingly unaffordable. Nuclear weapons thus
provided a way to reduce overall expenditure while maintaining Britain’s global commitments
and position in the world.

British elites had recognized well before nuclear acquisition that Britain’s conventional
posture would be profoundly affected by nuclear weapons. For example, a 1945 memo by
Prime Minister Clement Attlee recognized that “the emergence of the atomic bomb meant that
many of our present ideas on such matters as strategic bases and frontiers...must be regarded as
obsolete,” and in 1946 the Cabinet Defence Committee “declined to endorse the conclusions
reached by the Chiefs of Staff on British strategic requirements in the Middle East” until they
were able to assess the importance of “the latest developments in weapons and methods of
war.” In his private notes in 1952, Sir John Slessor was explicit that nuclear weapons could be
used as a substitute for unaffordable conventional forces, arguing that avoiding retrenchment
despite the “economic crisis” facing Britain would require “preserving and increasing the main
deterrent—atomic air power.”

The idea was emphasized particularly strongly in the 1952 Global Strategy Paper, “a classic

190. “Note of a Meeting of Ministers (29th August, 1945),” UKNA CAB 130/2, GEN 75/2nd Meeting.
among military documents,” which made Britain “the first nation to base its national security planning...upon a declaratory policy of nuclear deterrence.” British elites were under no illusions about the increasing economic difficulties facing the country, concerns that were exacerbated by the force build-up that occurred after the outbreak of the Korean War. These concerns continued throughout the 1950s, with incoming Prime Minister Eden told by his Minister of Defence in 1955 that “unless existing programs were revised, the cost of defence would rise during the next four years from £1,527 million in 1955 to £1,929 million in 1959.”

Eden agreed that this was unsustainable as he initiated a reappraisal of British defense policy, stating: “We must now cut our coat according to our cloth. There is not much cloth.”

Nuclear weapons offered a solution to this problem. Starting in 1955, Britain began to substitute nuclear weapons for conventional forces. Although the 1952 Global Strategy Paper had endorsed nuclear substitution, the 1952 paper ultimately “failed to make the shift from theory to practice with little alteration resulting in Britain’s force posture.” Despite its successful nuclear test, Britain lacked a deliverable nuclear capability. Reinforcing the argument above that it was Britain’s “ability to put those bombs down where we want to” that would allow British strategy to change, it was in 1955 that the concepts articulated in the 1952 Strategy Paper began to be reflected in Britain’s conventional posture. British conventional manpower stayed around 800,000 and 850,000 between 1951 and 1954, but beginning in 1955, British manpower began to decrease at a significant rate, dropping to 750,000 in 1956, 700,000 in 1957, 615,000 in 1958, 565,000 in 1959 and 520,000 in 1960. In the immediate aftermath of nuclear acquisition, Britain thus reduced its manpower by around a third in five years—a dramatic demonstration of the extent of the nuclear substitution that Britain engaged in. Similarly, overall defense expenditure was held constant in 1956 (a decline in real terms and as a percentage of GNP), and subsequently fell as British planners placed greater “reliance upon the nuclear

194. Rosecrance, Defence of the Realm, 188.
196. Navias, Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning, 4; Bartlett, The Long Retreat, 97.
198. I use version 4.0 of the National Material Capabilities Dataset, released in 2010. The original data is described in Singer, “Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States.”
deterrent.” British elites were clear that this substitution was occurring. As Eden stated explicitly in 1956, it is on “the atomic weapons that we now rely, not only to deter aggression but to deal with aggression if it should be launched...we are spending too much on forces of types which are no longer of primary importance.” To avoid Britain’s defense commitments further damaging the British economy, he believed it essential to “continue the trend towards greater reliance on nuclear weapons.” Official white papers echoed this position: “successive Defence White Papers from 1955 on assumed that any major aggression would be met with nuclear weapons.”

The 1957 Defence White Paper ossified these trends. The Minister of Defence, Duncan Sandys, had his powers strengthened by the Prime Minister in order that he be able to succeed in his “first goal”: securing substantial further reductions in military expenditure and manpower. Sandys aimed to reduce annual expenditure from around £1,600m to around £1,300m and proposed further deep cuts in the size of the armed forces from 690,000 to 375,000, a development Prime Minister Macmillan explicitly stated “must depend on the acceptance of nuclear weapons.” Crucially, however, nuclear weapons did not simply permit Britain to reduce expenditure on conventional forces. They allowed Britain to do so without changing Britain’s political commitments or overall strategic position. As James’ secret internal history stated: “The nuclear dimension of defence...was seen as providing the opportunity for economies in defence...without any sacrifices in national security or international influence.” As a result, “the period [from 1956] was one which saw little change in the objectives of British defence commitments outside Europe. What changed was the resources to meet those commitments.”

Overall, therefore, British elites cared greatly about maintaining the British position and status in the world, and saw nuclear weapons as a tool with which to achieve this. By

---

201. Ibid.
206. Ibid., xiv.
substituting nuclear weapons for conventional forces, Britain could maintain its commitments and position while reducing its unsustainable expenditure on conventional forces. Nuclear weapons thus facilitated these efforts to maintain the British position in an era of reduced spending on defense.

3.4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, British elites appear to have thought about nuclear weapons in the way the theory suggests. British elites viewed nuclear weapons as a solution to the twin problems of reducing British reliance on the United States (confirming Hypothesis 7), and as a tool with which Britain could maintain its position in the world (Hypothesis 8). It is hard to imagine a more explicit articulation of both of these views than the summary offered by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who argued explicitly that Britain's nuclear status: "gives us a better position in the world, it gives us a better position with respect to the United States. It puts us where we ought to be, in the position of a Great Power. The fact that we have it makes the United States pay greater regard to our point of view, and that is of great importance." Not only, therefore, did British foreign policy change in the way that the theory expects, but British elites viewed nuclear weapons as facilitating those same behaviors. This provides important additional evidence that British nuclear weapons did indeed cause the change in behavior observed.

3.5 Alternative explanations

This section examines the performance of the three alternative explanations. Although the theory of nuclear opportunism performs well in the British case, if other explanations perform equally well it may be that the British case does not in fact provide much support for the theory.

The first alternative explanation is offered by S. Paul Kapur's strategic pessimism. What does this explanation predict about British behavior, and are those predictions borne out in the historical record? As discussed in Section 2.5, two variables determine the predicted

outcomes in Kapur’s theory. The first variable is whether the state is conventionally weak. As discussed above, although Britain had suffered substantially in World War II, it had not had its territory occupied and retained a powerful conventional military. Britain had the third largest military in the world, the second largest navy, and retained a large empire that had contributed considerable military capability to the allied war effort. Britain was not, therefore, a conventionally weak state at the point of nuclear acquisition. Similarly, Britain had firmly status quo preferences: as described above, Britain’s political priority was to maintain the British position in international politics. As such, Kapur’s theory correctly predicts that Britain would not engage in aggression—defined in Section 2.2 as the more belligerent pursuit of pre-existing interests. However, the theory anticipates that because Britain was not both conventionally weak and revisionist, nuclear weapons should not have altered British foreign policy in significant ways. As seen, however, nuclear weapons facilitated significant changes in British foreign policy that occurred at the point of nuclear acquisition. While Britain did not engage in aggression (as Kapur would correctly predict), Britain changed its foreign policies in other, important ways in response to nuclear acquisition. Nuclear opportunism thus makes more precise and more accurate predictions than the theory of strategic pessimism.

The second alternative explanation is offered by defensive realism. This explanation predicts that nuclear weapons would make Britain more secure, and thus that Britain would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, expansion, or bolstering—all of which are behaviors driven by insecurity in the defensive realist world view. However, the theory predicts that states may use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise. Defensive realism makes several correct predictions in the British case: Britain did use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness and independence, and did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression or expansion. However, in contrast to the predictions of defensive realism, Britain showed no greater inclination to compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and did use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of junior allies. Thus, while defensive realism makes a number of correct predictions, it does not perform as well as the theory of nuclear opportunism.

The third and final alternative explanation draws on the idea of the nuclear taboo becoming
increasingly strong over time. This explanation predicts that states acquiring nuclear weapons late in the nuclear era would experience smaller foreign policy effects than those acquiring nuclear weapons early in the nuclear era, because of the declining credibility of the threat of nuclear acquisition. Britain acquired a deliverable nuclear weapons capability ten years into the nuclear era, a time at which the norm of non-use was "beginning to emerge and operated mostly instrumentally, although some decision makers harbored moral qualms about using nuclear weapons."208 As a result, the predictions of the explanation based on the nuclear taboo are unclear in this case. If we view the taboo as not yet fully formed by the mid-1950s, and thus that normative constraints did not reduce the plausibility of British nuclear use, then we would expect that nuclear weapons would indeed affect British foreign policy. However, the nuclear taboo explanation would not then make determinate predictions about exactly how nuclear weapons would affect British foreign policy. On the other hand, if we view the taboo as sufficiently well developed by the mid-1950s that it should be expected to significantly constrain the likelihood of nuclear use, then the explanation would anticipate limited or no effects of nuclear weapons on British foreign policy. In either interpretation, the explanation based on the nuclear taboo is outperformed by the theory of nuclear opportunism.

I also consider one case-specific alternative explanation. In particular, Churchill was replaced by Eden as Prime Minister in 1955. Could it be that the changes in behavior we observe are due to the change in leader, rather than by the acquisition of a deliverable capability? While it is not possible to rule out this alternative explanation completely, there are reasons to doubt its ability to explain the changes in behavior observed. First, Eden was intimately involved in foreign policy making as Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister prior to becoming Prime Minister, including being the "primary architect" of several of the pre-1955 policies discussed below such as the pursuit of U.S. assistance in responding to the 1951 nationalization of Anglo-Iranian oil and the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty.209 Second, Eden and Churchill came from the same political party, and shared a similar outlook on foreign policy, with Eden recalling Churchill commenting that "you could put each of us in a separate room,

Table 3.2: Relative performance of the four explanations in the British case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Nuclear Pragmatism</th>
<th>Defensive Realism</th>
<th>Strategic Pessimism</th>
<th>Nuclear Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YES = change in behavior predicted; NO = no change in behavior predicted; UNCLEAR = indeterminate prediction; ✓ = correct prediction; ✗ = incorrect prediction

put any questions of foreign policy to us, and nine times out of ten we would give the same answer.”

While the relationship between Churchill and Eden was often difficult and fractious, this stemmed largely from personal rather than political differences, along with tensions that emerged because Eden was an impatient “heir apparent” as Churchill gradually lost his grip on power. It therefore seems unlikely that Eden and Churchill differed sufficiently on matters of foreign policy to explain the differences in behavior that we observe in British foreign policy in the aftermath of 1955. Indeed, if anything, Eden was less inclined than Churchill to respond to challenges steadfastly: for example, Eden had argued—against Churchill—that maintaining large numbers of forces in the Middle East and in the Suez base was unnecessary, while Churchill was more inclined to place a high priority on maintaining the British position in Suez.

Table 3.2 summarizes the correct and incorrect predictions made by each explanation. The theory of nuclear opportunism thus comfortably outperforms the alternative explanations in explaining the British case.

3.6 Conclusion

The evidence shows that nuclear acquisition substantially affected British foreign policy. As a reasonably secure state constrained by a senior ally and declining in power, British elites saw

---

nuclear weapons as a solution to two fundamental political problems they faced: the problem of dependence on the United States, and the problem of maintaining Britain’s position in the world despite Britain facing long-run decline. Britain therefore found pursuing independence from the United States, the bolstering of its junior allies, and steadfastness in the face of challenges, to be attractive, and used nuclear weapons to facilitate those behaviors. After acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, Britain was able to bolster its allies in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, and responded to challenges to its position more steadfastly and independently of the preferences of the United States, despite simultaneously cutting back on its conventional forces over the same period. These outcomes are consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism, which outperforms the three alternative explanations.
Chapter 4

South Africa

This chapter examines the ways in which nuclear acquisition affected the foreign policies of South Africa. As with the British case, the South African case provides considerable leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. The predictions made by the theory of nuclear opportunism laid out in Section 2.3 are different from those made by all three of the alternative explanations. The theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression (the more belligerent pursuit of pre-existing interests) and steadfastness (standing more firmly in defense of the status quo) against the threats it faced in Southern Africa. By contrast, defensive realism predicts that South Africa would engage in steadfastness, independence, and compromise, and both Kapur’s theory of strategic pessimism and the norms-based explanation anticipate little effect of nuclear acquisition on South African foreign policy. Although the evidence is more tentative than in the British case (partly due to the limited number of surviving or declassified documents available that describe high-level South African strategic thinking during the 1970s and 1980s), I argue that the historical record is largely consistent with the predictions of nuclear opportunism.

This chapter proceeds in five parts. First, Section 4.1 outlines the utility of the South African case in testing the theory. Second, Section 4.2 describes the predictions made by the theory of nuclear opportunism, and identifies the point at which South African nuclear weapons should theoretically be expected to affect South African foreign policy calculations. Third, Section 4.3 examines South African foreign policy in the period before and after South Africa obtained a
nuclear capability. I argue that the acquisition of the ability to test a nuclear weapon in 1979 marks a discontinuity in South African foreign policy behavior that is largely consistent with the theory advanced. South Africa did not use its nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion, bolstering, independence, or compromise. South Africa did, however, use nuclear weapons to facilitate conventional aggression in the Border War it was fighting in Angola. Fourth, Section 4.4 examines the ways in which South African elites thought about nuclear weapons. Although South African elites do not typically say outright that they believed nuclear weapons were useful in facilitating aggression (and for a variety of reasons, we would not expect them to do so), from their statements one can piece together a coherent causal logic linking nuclear weapons to increased South African aggression. Specifically, South African elites confirm that South African foreign policy and conduct in the Border War was constrained by the need to avoid potential escalation; that nuclear weapons would allow South Africa to better control that escalation should it happen; and that South Africa became more tolerant of escalation, and were thus prepared to engage in greater aggression, in the period after acquiring nuclear weapons. Finally, Section 4.5 examines the performance of the three alternative explanations.

4.1 The utility of the South African case

The South African case provides significant leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. As with the British case, South Africa provides a hard case for the theory (though for different reasons than the British case), and also provides a case in which we can distinguish between the performance of the theory of nuclear opportunism and the alternative explanations.

As with the case of Britain, South Africa provides a case in which we might expect that nuclear acquisition would have a relatively limited effect on foreign policy. South Africa was a status quo power, trying to hold on to its position in Southern Africa and maintain its domestic institutions. South Africa maintained conventional superiority over its neighbors, never revealed its nuclear capability or acquired a second strike capability, and developed nuclear weapons well after the emergence of the norm of nuclear non-use. All of these factors
would suggest that South Africa would be relatively unlikely to respond to nuclear acquisition with large changes in its foreign policy. The case of South Africa thus presents a hard case for the theory of nuclear opportunism.

Second, the South African case provides an excellent case with which to adjudicate between the different explanations. The theory of nuclear opportunism, emphasizing the war in Angola and threats posed to South Africa by the ability of the Soviet Union to escalate its involvement in the conflict, anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness. By contrast, Paul Kapur’s theory of strategic pessimism would anticipate little effect of nuclear acquisition. Despite the fact that it faced severe threats, South Africa maintained conventional superiority over its neighbors during the period in which South Africa possessed nuclear weapons, and South Africa cannot therefore be considered a weak state. Similarly, the explanation based on the nuclear taboo would anticipate little effect of South African nuclear acquisition, because South Africa acquired nuclear weapons late in the nuclear era, well after the norm against nuclear use had developed. Defensive realism anticipates that South Africa would exhibit greater steadfastness, independence, and a willingness to compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition because nuclear weapons should have made South Africa more secure. The four theories make different predictions, and the case of South Africa thus allows us to distinguish between their performance.

4.2 Predictions

What effects does the theory of nuclear opportunism predict that nuclear weapons would have on South African foreign policy? This section measures the variables identified in Section 2.3, and uses them to make a series of predictions in the South African case. As in the British case, I make predictions about how South African foreign policy behavior should have changed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and about the ways in which South African elites should have thought about the utility of nuclear weapons.

In order to generate precise predictions, we first need to identify the historical juncture at which the variables should be measured, and the point at which the effects of nuclear
weapons should be anticipated. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is necessary to pay attention to
the intended South African nuclear posture and manner in which South Africa intended to
use nuclear weapons, and the particular technological and military capabilities that such uses
require. This enables us to accurately identify the relevant point of acquisition for South Africa,
and, therefore, the appropriate point in time at which to look for discontinuities in foreign
policy behavior.

South Africa adopted a catalytic posture that aimed to threaten a nuclear test as a way to
“draw in Western—particularly American—assistance in the event of an overwhelming Soviet
or Cuban-backed conventional threat.”¹ Most scholars of South Africa’s nuclear program agree
that this was the way South Africa intended to use its nuclear weapons.² This is confirmed
by interviews with officials involved in the nuclear program and South African military and
political decisionmaking at the time.³ As former South African ambassador to the United
Nations (UN) Jeremy Shearar describes the logic of the strategy, “the thinking was that if the
West knew we were going to test, they would want to stop us and they would then pledge
support to South Africa.”⁴ Exactly what conflict threshold would have triggered South Africa
to begin implementing the strategy remains unclear, although several members of the South
African political and military elite suggested that Cuban or Angolan forces crossing into
Namibia (then known as South West Africa, which South Africa controlled and ran as its own
territory) would have been sufficient.⁵

The technological requirements of such a catalytic posture are relatively modest. A state
does not require the ability to deliver nuclear weapons with any reliability, nor does it require

². E.g., Mitchell Reiss, Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities (Baltimore: Johns
     Hopkins University Press, 1995); Waldo Stumpf, “South Africa’s Nuclear Weapons Program: From Deterrence
     Weapons of Mass Destruction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern
     Era; Ori Rabinowitz, Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and its Cold War Deals (Oxford: Oxford University
     Press, 2014).
³. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014; author interview with Waldo Stumpf, Pretoria,
     June 11, 2014; author interview with Major General (retired) Gert Opperman, Johannesburg, June 23, 2014; author
⁴. Author interview with Ambassador Jeremy Shearar (retired), Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
⁵. Author interview with Waldo Stumpf, Pretoria, June 11, 2014; author interview with Ambassador Victor
     Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014.
a large or sophisticated arsenal.\(^6\) All that is needed for nuclear weapons to affect the foreign policy calculations of a state employing a catalytic posture is a crude explosive device and a quantity of fissile material sufficient to sustain a chain reaction, because that is all that is required to be able to conduct a nuclear test.

South Africa attained this capability in 1979. André Buys, the future chair of the working group on nuclear strategy within Armscor (the state’s arms production agency) recalls that the South Africans had initially thought they would have sufficient highly enriched uranium (HEU) to conduct a test in 1977. However, progress in producing HEU was slower than expected, and South Africa “only had sufficient material for the first explosion in 1979.”\(^7\) By this point, South Africa had already constructed a device with which to conduct an explosion.\(^8\) The factor constraining South Africa’s ability to test was therefore having sufficient HEU, rather than a device with which to explode the fissile material. In Buys’ words, “the design was ready, everything was built, we were just waiting for a sufficient quantity of enriched uranium.”\(^9\)

Although South African plans to conduct a cold test in 1977 had been thwarted by the Soviet discovery of the intended test facility that the South Africans had built in the Kalahari, South African engineers were nonetheless highly confident that the device would work. Buys recalls that “I was convinced [that a cold test was not necessary]. The Little Boy weapon that was used on Hiroshima was never tested, so why would we have to test?”\(^10\) Waldo Stumpf, the head of the South African Atomic Energy Corporation (AEC) at the time the program was dismantled, confirms that the cancellation of the cold test did “not really” affect South African calculations about whether or not the device would work, because the device was relatively simple and because South African scientists had already “done a lot of other tests—firing one half of the projectile into the other half, criticality tests, etc.”\(^11\) From 1979, South Africa had a device that could be tested within “a few days” of an order being given, and senior political

---

8. Ibid., 54–56.
9. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
leaders were made aware that South Africa had attained this capability. South Africa gained more sophisticated nuclear weapons in the early 1980s, with a ballistic bomb that could be “pushed out of the back of an aircraft” in 1982 and glide bombs beginning in 1983. South Africa also began exploring more advanced delivery systems that would have provided South Africa with a more sophisticated nuclear arsenal, including developing plans to deliver nuclear weapons using ballistic missiles and artillery guns. Nonetheless, South Africa acquired the basic capabilities required for its nuclear posture in 1979. As a result, it is in 1979 that we should expect that nuclear weapons would begin to affect South African calculations about foreign policy.

What changes in behavior should we expect to see in 1979? I now apply the theory of nuclear opportunism laid out in Chapter 2 to generate predictions for the case of South Africa. The theory’s application to the South African case, and the resulting predictions, are summarized in Figure 4.1.

The first variable in the sequence is whether South Africa faced severe territorial threats or was involved in an ongoing war. As discussed in Chapter 2, severe territorial threats have several components. In particular, the threat must be proximate to the state and pose a threat to significant portions of the state’s territory, and must be perceived by the state to have hostile intentions. At the point at which it acquired the ability to conduct a nuclear test, South Africa faced such threats, and was also involved in an ongoing war in Angola.

South Africa’s security environment had been worsening since the 1960s as the African continent experienced widespread decolonization. The six-fold increase in South Africa’s defense budget that occurred between 1961 and 1968 reflected these concerns. Nonetheless, the immediate threats that South Africa faced remained manageable. South Africa (and South West Africa, which South Africa controlled) was bordered by Portuguese colonies that did
not threaten its discriminatory domestic political institutions and were controlled by tens of thousands of Portuguese forces. These “frontline” states provided a buffer against the forces of nationalism and revolutionary socialism that greatly worried white South African elites.16 The colonies of Angola and Mozambique had been an important “part of South Africa’s forward defense,” and the Portuguese government had allowed South Africa to conduct operations against South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) forces in southern Angola.17 The white-minority government in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) led by Ian Smith provided an additional sympathetic neighbor. By the late 1970s, however, South Africa’s

security environment had dramatically worsened. In particular, the 1974 military coup in Portugal upended South Africa’s security environment. The new ruling junta in Lisbon granted independence to Mozambique and Angola in 1975, and informed the South Africans that they were no longer allowed in Angola. And in 1979, Ian Smith lost power in Rhodesia to Robert Mugabe. These states offered safe haven to insurgents seeking the independence of South West Africa (notably, SWAPO) and the dismantlement of apartheid within South Africa. Simultaneously, racial tensions (most dramatically demonstrated in the 1976 Soweto riots), increasing acts of sabotage and terrorism, and increasing international condemnation (including by the United States) of South Africa’s internal politics, increasingly threatened South Africa’s internal stability.

South Africa’s new neighbors were hostile to the apartheid government, supportive of the African National Congress (ANC), the banned anti-apartheid party, and enjoyed close relations with the Soviet bloc. By late 1975, Soviet military planes had begun to transfer Cuban military personnel and Soviet materiel and advisers to Angola, although the extent to which such Cuban and Soviet actions were themselves triggered by South African actions is disputed. Nonetheless, as increasingly large numbers of Cuban forces and Soviet military equipment and advisors began to enter Southern Africa, South African elites perceived a far more dangerous security environment. As Waldo Stumpf writes, “[d]uring the 1970s, especially the latter half of the decade, the political and military environment around South Africa deteriorated markedly...the large buildup of Cuban military forces in Angola, beginning in 1975, which eventually peaked at 50,000 troops, reinforced a strong perception within the government that it would remain internationally isolated.” Victor Zazaraj, a retired South African Ambassador and Private Assistant to Foreign Minister Pik Botha during the 1980s, recalls that the situation in Southern Africa in the aftermath of the Portuguese coup was “perceived and experienced as

---

19. Walters, South Africa and the Bomb, 12; Gleijeses, Visions of Freedom, 139–145.
an existential crisis... whereby the country’s future existence, as we understood it, was under threat... we had this [hostile] arc across Southern Africa that separated us from the rest of Africa.”

Deon Fourie, who taught at the South African Defence College during the 1970s and 1980s, remembers that “everybody was shaken rigid [by Cuban and Soviet buildups].”

There was little doubt among South African political and military elites about the scope and hostility of the intentions of the Soviet Union and Cubans towards South Africa. South African elites perceived that Soviet goals in the region were ambitious and included the overthrow of

---

23. Author interview with Professor Deon Fourie, Pretoria, June 16, 2014.
the apartheid regime. David Steward, a former ambassador to the United Nations, head of the Bureau for Information, and Chief of Staff to President FW De Klerk, recalls that “we believed that we were facing an existential crisis and we were extremely worried about the incursion of the Soviet Union into Southern Africa because...Southern Africa was a particularly significant target for the Soviet Union...they wanted the SACP [South African Communist Party] to take over.” Colonel Jan Breytenbach, who commanded large numbers of covert operations inside Angola, bluntly states that “when outside powers come to Africa, they don’t come here to enjoy a holiday. They come here to expand their influence.” Defence Minister Magnus Malan writes in his memoirs that the Soviet goal was “helping the communists to conquer South Africa.”

In private, Malan would regularly use a quotation attributed to Leonid Brezhnev: “Our goal is to get control over the two great treasuries on which the West depend—the energy treasury of the Persian Gulf and the mineral treasury of Central and Southern Africa.” Similarly, General Jannie Geldenhuys, chief of the South African Defence Force from 1985-1990, poses a rhetorical question in assessing the motivations of Cuba and the Soviet Union: What “did South Africa have to do with the situation in Angola during the 1970s and 1980s? Obviously, any decent person would ask the much more valid question: What did the island of Cuba and the Soviet Union have to do with Angola?”

The threat that South African elites perceived was not simply the military threat then posed by South Africa’s neighbors. The South African Defence Force (SADF) had superior training and equipment to the opponents it faced in Angola, including the Cuban forces. However, the fear among South African elites was that the Soviet Union had the capability to very quickly escalate the conflict with large numbers of forces and advanced equipment that South Africa would have no ability to respond to. Thus, while South Africa maintained military superiority over the threats it faced, South African elites nonetheless had much to fear. South Africa’s opponents could marshall greater numbers, and if the Soviet Union decided

25. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014; Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 7
27. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 52.
to escalate its support, even South Africa’s qualitative edge could easily be overturned. As David Steward recalls, “even though we were confronted with fairly sophisticated forces in Southern Angola, we never really felt that we were not capable of dealing with them, and we were proved to be right...[but] we were worried that there might be further troops, further Russian troops, further intervention, that would then affect our conventional superiority.”

A secondary source of threat was that even those of South Africa’s neighbors which did not pose an offensive military threat (such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique) would provide a safe haven for the ANC and its military wing Umkhonte we Sizwe (MK) from which it would be able to launch sabotage and terrorist attacks within South Africa. As Major General Gert Opperman, who commanded operations in Angola and served as Military Secretary to Defence Minister Magnus Malan, argues, “we never anticipated that there would be any incursion from Botswana or Zimbabwe or Mozambique of their own forces onto our territories. But they could provide the umbrella under which the ANC could launch incursions. Not armed incursions in the combat sense, but infiltrations—[they would be able to] get through to our infrastructure [and commit acts of sabotage and terrorism].”

Thus, while apartheid South Africa possessed substantial conventional military power, the threats it faced were significant. South Africa had a large border to defend, could only draw upon a small percentage of its population to meet any potential combination of internal and external threats, and faced states whose combined population was far larger than South Africa’s and who had a superpower patron with the ability to provide military forces and capabilities that South Africa would be unable to match. This threat was articulated in the apocalyptic concept of “total onslaught” that entered the South African strategic lexicon as early as 1973, and the putative South African solution in the concept of “total strategy” that saw a “reorientation towards a ‘landward threat’ and away from the traditional role of South Africa as a strategic partner of the West in protecting the sea-lanes around the southern point of

30. Author interview with David Steward, Johannesburg, June 6, 2014.
31. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
32. Walters, South Africa and the Bomb, 75.
Africa." I argue that these threats meet the definition of the severe territorial threats outlined in Chapter 2.

Even if one doubts that these threats were of the severity necessary to classify South Africa as facing severe territorial threats, by 1979 South Africa was also involved in an ongoing war. As discussed in detail below, at the point at which South Africa acquired nuclear weapons, it had already conducted a major invasion of Angola in 1975 (Operation Savannah) that had been a tactical success but a strategic disaster that had left South Africa diplomatically isolated. In addition, numerous smaller raids inside Angola had been conducted with the aim of destroying SWAPO camps, and supporting South Africa’s proxy in Angola, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). This conflict, known as the Border War, would last until the end of the Cold War.

The predictions of the theory of nuclear opportunism are therefore straightforward. South Africa’s geopolitical priority should have been to seek to improve its position against the source of those threats. For states looking to improve their position against severe threats, both aggression (defined as the more belligerent pursuit of pre-existing interests) and steadfastness (defined as standing more firmly in defense of the status quo) against the source of the threats it faced should have been attractive foreign policy behaviors for South Africa. The theory would therefore anticipate that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate these behaviors. This leads to Hypotheses 1 and 2.

\[ H_{South\ Africa\ 1}: \text{South Africa should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.} \]

\[ H_{South\ Africa\ 2}: \text{South Africa should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.} \]

The theory of nuclear opportunism thus predicts that both aggression and steadfastness would be incentivized in the South African case. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the

34. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, ch. 2.
theory does not predict the precise balance between aggression and steadfastness that should be observed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Nonetheless, several factors discussed above suggest that aggression would be relatively more incentivized than steadfastness in the South African case, and that we should therefore expect to see South Africa use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression to a greater degree than steadfastness. South Africa did not have to worry about reactive proliferation since none of its neighbors posed a plausible proliferation threat. South Africa therefore faced little incentive to restrain its aggression for fear of triggering proliferation among its neighbors. Similarly, the threats that South Africa faced were highly geographically proximate, which should have made aggression against the source of those threats more attractive. We should, therefore, expect to see a more noticeable increase in South African aggression than in South African steadfastness.

Because of the political priority that states facing severe threats or involved in ongoing wars must place on improving their position against the source of the threat, the threat variable is the only one that matters for the predictions made in the case of South Africa, and aggression and steadfastness are the only behaviors that such states typically find attractive. States facing severe threats, for example, do not have the luxury of pursuing independence (defined as taking actions that allies oppose or do not support), because states in this position require support from anywhere they can get it. As a result, we would not expect that using nuclear weapons to facilitate independence would be an attractive option for South Africa. Similarly, states facing severe threats must improve their own security before it becomes attractive to improve the security of others. As a result, using nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering—strengthening allies or alliances—is an unattractive proposition for states facing severe threats. Similarly, given the scale of challenges and threats the state already faces, engaging in expansion—the widening of a state’s interests in international politics—is also unappealing. This leads to Hypotheses 3-5.

$H_{South\ Africa\ 3}$: South Africa should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.

$H_{South\ Africa\ 4}$: South Africa should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate
bolstering in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.

**H\textsubscript{South Africa} 5:** South Africa should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.

While responding to the additional security provided by nuclear weapons by showing an increased inclination to compromise—the acceptance of less in ongoing disputes—would be predicted by defensive realists (as discussed below in Section 4.5), it is not predicted by the theory of nuclear opportunism. Nuclear opportunism anticipates that states seek to use their nuclear weapons to try to improve their position in international politics, rather than to make concessions that they previously deemed unacceptable. This leads to Hypothesis 6.

**H\textsubscript{South Africa} 6:** South Africa should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in 1979.

As in the British case, we can also make predictions about how South African elites should have thought about nuclear weapons and the benefits that nuclear weapons offered. The theory suggests that the political priority for states facing severe threats or involved in an ongoing war is to improve their position against their adversaries, and that elites will view nuclear weapons as a useful tool for pursuing that political priority.

**H\textsubscript{South Africa} 7:** South African elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as useful tools to improve their position against the source of the threats they faced.

Table 4.1 summarizes the hypotheses, and where I look in the historical record for evidence to confirm or reject the hypotheses. The following sections examine whether these predictions are borne out in the historical record.

### 4.3 South African foreign policy around the point of acquisition

Did South Africa’s foreign policy behavior change in the way that the theory suggests? The theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that South Africa should have used nuclear weapons
Table 4.1: Summary of predictions in the South African case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Where to look for evidence?</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. South Africa should use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. South Africa should use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. South Africa should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. South Africa should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. South Africa should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. South Africa should not use nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise</td>
<td>South African behavior around the point of acquisition</td>
<td>4.3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. South African elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as useful tools to improve their position against the source of the threats they faced</td>
<td>South African elite thinking</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to facilitate aggression and steadfastness after 1979. I first examine South Africa’s behavior in its primary ongoing conflict during the 1970s and 1980s to assess whether the evidence suggests there were any discontinuities in South African behavior at the point of nuclear acquisition. I then examine South Africa’s foreign policy with respect to its (few) allies, to assess whether South Africa behaved more independently or sought to bolster allies to a greater degree in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Finally, I examine whether South Africa’s goals in its region widened in a way that would indicate South African expansion in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

4.3.1 Aggression, steadfastness, and compromise

Did South Africa become more aggressive in its conduct of the ongoing Border War in 1979 as the theory of nuclear opportunism would suggest? Did South Africa defend its position more steadfastly? Or did South Africa become more willing to compromise after nuclear acquisition? This section examines South Africa’s conduct in the most important ongoing conflict in which it was involved at the time—the civil war in Angola, and the broader Border War of which it was a part. I assess whether in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South Africa became more willing to make compromises, whether South Africa pushed more aggressively in pursuit of its
goals, and whether South Africa became more willing to fight to defend the status quo.

**Temporal patterns of conflict in the Border War**

We can first examine how the macro-level patterns of conflict that South Africa was involved in changed over time. In the ten years preceding South African nuclear acquisition, South Africa was involved in an average of 1.25 MIDs per year. Consistent with the idea that South Africa behaved more aggressively in existing disputes, in the ten years following nuclear acquisition, this number of conflicts had risen by 25% to 1.55 MIDs per year. Similarly, and again consistent with the idea that South Africa became more aggressive in the immediate aftermath of nuclear acquisition, Figure 4.3 shows how the geographic scope and frequency of South African operations in Angola changed over time. In the five years preceding nuclear acquisition, major South African operations on Angolan territory were rare (triangles in Figure 4.3), with the notable exception of Operation Savannah (stars in Figure 4.3), in which South Africa believed that the United States would provide significant support that never materialized (Operation Savannah is discussed in more detail below). In the 5 years after nuclear acquisition, however, South African operations inside Angola became far more common (squares in Figure 4.3), and South African concerns about penetrating deep inside Angolan territory appear to have been less constraining.

**South African conduct in Angola, 1974-1979**

We can also examine South African conduct in individual operations. In the five years preceding nuclear acquisition, South Africa was relatively cautious in the operations it undertook in Angola (with Operation Savannah providing a notable exception, which is discussed further below). South Africa generally conducted its operations covertly, staying close to the border between Angola and Namibia, and generally limited the manpower and heavy weaponry dedicated to them. In the five years following 1979, South Africa became considerably more comfortable going deeper inside Angolan territory, doing so with greater regularity, and using heavier weaponry and larger numbers of forces in order to do so.
South African efforts to undermine the ongoing insurgency in South West Africa had been ongoing since the 1960s, but it was in 1974 that the SADF took over responsibility for counterinsurgency operations from the South African Police (SAP), just weeks before the coup d'état overthrowing Portugal's fascist dictatorship. In the aftermath of the coup, South Africa could no longer rely on Portuguese forces to prevent SWAPO fighters from setting up bases within Angola from which to conduct raids inside South West Africa, and could no longer count on support in conducting anti-SWAPO patrols north of the border. For SWAPO, this

35. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 12.
provided an enormous benefit: SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma wrote that “it was if a locked door had suddenly swung open,” and SWAPO moved their headquarters to the Angolan capital of Luanda.36 Within weeks, southern Angola and north South West Africa were “swarming with SWAPO armed bands.”37

Hawks in the SADF wanted to cross the Angolan border at this stage to “clobber SWAPO on the other side.”38 But South Africa held back, with Prime Minister John Vorster remaining particularly cautious. It was only when the United States and Organisation of African Unity (OAU) encouraged South Africa to take action to prevent the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from taking power in Luanda that South Africa undertook a significant military operation deep inside Angola, in Operation Savannah. The precise role that the United States played in encouraging South African action is disputed, and U.S. records have been censored to downplay the U.S. role.39 Nonetheless, South African elites were under little doubt that the United States had encouraged action. David Steward recalls that South Africa went into Angola “with the support of the United States,” a claim confirmed by General Opperman, who argued that “one of the conditions of the American promises to become involved [was that] their role should not be [revealed].”40 Ambassador Victor Zazeraj is adament that South Africa went into Angola “at the request of the U.S.,” and that South Africa would not have considered doing so without American encouragement and the promise of American reinforcements, a suggestion that is backed up by the serious misgivings that many South African cabinet members (including the Prime Minister) held regarding the operation.41 Although U.S. officials have sought to play down the American role, Chester Crocker, the Reagan administration’s senior official working on Southern Africa, acknowledges that “our winks and nods formed part of the calculus of Angola’s neighbors.”42 Piero Gleijeses,
a historian generally unsympathetic to the South African government, confirms that Pretoria “might otherwise have hesitated” had it not been for American encouragement.43\(^4\)

South Africa’s initial objectives in Operation Savannah were rather modest: to help UNITA reclaim territory it had previously controlled. Furthermore, South Africa hoped to accomplish these goals while maintaining the secrecy of its role, due to fears that an overt invasion would create significant escalation dynamics.45 However, South Africa achieved tactical successes well beyond what was expected. Despite using mostly World War II-era equipment and materiel that South Africa would modernize significantly in the years ahead, South African forces achieved quick and dramatic advances, with a CIA operative describing it as “the most effective military strike force ever seen in black Africa, exploding through the MPLA/Cuban ranks in a blitzkrieg,” and with one commander moving “more than 3,100km up a hostile coast in a mere 33 days of movement” for the loss of just one South African life.46 South African forces even ended up within striking distance of Luanda, although the Cabinet was informed that several hundred casualties would likely result if South Africa attempted to take the Angolan capital.47

But South Africa’s efforts to maintain secrecy failed. South Africa’s intervention in Angola was widely reported around the world. More importantly, the escalation that South Africa feared transpired: within weeks, 36,000 Cuban troops and 300 tanks had arrived on Angolan territory, making further advances increasingly challenging for South African forces.48 In addition, the United States abandoned its tacit support for South Africa, with Congress passing the Clark amendment forbidding aid to groups fighting in Angola.49 An OAU vote recognizing the MPLA as the legitimate government of Angola removed any trace of international legitimacy.

44. For a contrasting account that downplays the role of the United States in shaping South Africa’s decision to intervene, see Jamie Miller, “Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa’s Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976,” Journal of Cold War Studies 15, no. 3 (2013): 4–33.
47. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 19; Steenkamp, South Africa’s Border War, 54; author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
48. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 19; Gleijeses, Visions of Freedom, 9, 29.
49. Steenkamp, South Africa’s Border War, 56, 59.
to the South African intervention, and South Africa was forced to withdraw from Angola.\textsuperscript{50}

In the aftermath of Operation Savannah, SWAPO was “in a stronger military position than ever before...it could set up an open training, administrative and logistics structure inside Angola and launch its insurgents southwards as it chose,” and South African elites were aware that the “security commitment on our borders is likely to get bigger, not smaller.”\textsuperscript{51} Despite these threats, for the rest of 1976 South Africa largely restricted itself to minor operations, fearful of triggering further escalation.\textsuperscript{52} South African forces stayed mostly on the South West African side of the border, particularly in Northern Ovamboland, where they achieved some success against SWAPO insurgents.\textsuperscript{53} The same pattern continued throughout most of 1977, despite SWAPO achieving increasing lethality and operational skills due to the training they were receiving from Cuban advisors.\textsuperscript{54} However, attacks against South African forces in Northern South West Africa by insurgents, who would often fall back across the border into Angola when South Africa responded, became increasingly common and difficult for South African forces to deal with.\textsuperscript{55} One incident in October 1977 did lead to South Africa crossing the Angolan border in a more substantial way. South Africa responded to an unusually large group of around 90 insurgents crossing into Ovamboland that attacked a South African patrol. At the end of the skirmish, the South Africans had penetrated 21km into Angola and killed 61 insurgents, for a loss of five South African forces.

Thus, overall, South Africa continued to behave in a relatively restrained manner in terms of taking actions inside Angolan territory. Nonetheless, it continued to respond when attacked, harried insurgents in South West Africa, and gave short shrift to a peace proposal made by Britain, the United States, France, West Germany and Canada (the “Western Five”) that it viewed as unacceptable because it would have required a substantial South African drawdown from South West Africa without corresponding concessions on the Angolan side of the border.\textsuperscript{56}

At the end of 1977, however, Prime Minister Vorster and advisors met in the resort of Oubos.

\textsuperscript{50} Gleijeses, \textit{Visions of Freedom}, 29.
\textsuperscript{51} Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 60-61.
\textsuperscript{52} Malan, \textit{My Life With The SA Defence Force}, 189.
\textsuperscript{53} Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 63.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{55} Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 67; Malan, \textit{My Life With The SA Defence Force}, 189.
\textsuperscript{56} Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 69.
Vorster conceded that it would soon be necessary to take stronger actions against SWAPO, but was hesitant about taking the war into Angola and demanded that any such operations be approved at the highest political level to avoid escalation of the conflict.\textsuperscript{57} No immediate actions were taken, however, and a planned operation (Operation Bruilof) that would have taken place 25km inside Angola was abandoned for reasons that remain unclear.\textsuperscript{58} Some of the planning for Bruilof was expanded and folded into a more ambitious plan, labeled “Reindeer,” that was implemented in early May 1978 and hit three geographically separate targets simultaneously. Two of these targets, Chetequera and Dombondola, were close to the Angolan border, but the third, a camp near the town of Cassinga, was deeper inside Angolan territory. The attack on Cassinga was conducted by air, with South African special forces parachuted in and flown out to avoid the need for a substantial invasion of Angolan territory that would have risked escalation.\textsuperscript{59} The South Africans viewed the attack as a success, although it ignited significant controversy over whether the camp attacked at Cassinga was a SWAPO military installation or a refugee camp protected by SWAPO forces, with critics accusing the South Africans of carrying out a massacre of civilians, including many women and children (claims vigorously denied South Africans involved in the attack).\textsuperscript{60} In the aftermath of Operation Reindeer, up until the point at which South Africa acquired nuclear weapons, South African actions were again restrained, although two “modest” operations took place in March 1979 (Operation Rekstok and Operation Saffraan) inside Angola and Zambia.\textsuperscript{61}

Overall, therefore, South African behavior in the period leading up to nuclear acquisition was relatively restrained in terms of avoiding escalatory interventions inside Angola. While South Africa responded forcefully to attacks inside South West Africa, it did not generally conduct major operations inside Angola with two exceptions, Operation Savannah and Operation

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014; Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 74–80; Scholtz, \textit{The SADF in the Border War}, ch. 5.
\textsuperscript{61} Steenkamp, \textit{South Africa's Border War}, 86; Scholtz, \textit{The SADF in the Border War}, 99-100; Malan, \textit{My Life With The SA Defence Force}, 194–195.
Reindeer. In one of those operations (Savannah) South Africa had an increased tolerance for escalation because they anticipated support from the United States that failed to appear. The other operation (Reindeer) was a swift raid followed by a quick withdrawal of South African forces to minimize the risk of escalation. Although Operation Savannah demonstrated that South Africa had the military capabilities to conduct operations deep inside Angola, and South Africa was acquiring new conventional military capabilities over this period that increased its ability to project military power into Angola, South Africa generally sought to avoid conducting significant operations inside Angolan territory, and certainly avoided leaving forces in Angola for substantial periods of time.\footnote{Scholtz, \textit{The SADF in the Border War}, 45–49.}

\textbf{South African conduct in Angola, 1979-1984}


In May 1980, a few months after acquiring its nuclear capability, a decision was made that “SWAPO had to be taken on and beaten in its lair [Angola].”\footnote{Scholtz, \textit{The SADF in the Border War}, 103.} This operation, code-named “Sceptic,” was to take place in June 1980, and unlike in any operation since Savannah, the plan was that South African forces would stay inside Angolan territory for a significant time period to deal with any SWAPO forces that escaped the initial assaults on bases at Chifufa, Ionde, Mulola, and Chitumba. This marked a change from the pre-1979 South African modus
CHAPTER 4. SOUTH AFRICA

operandi of quick strikes inside Angolan territory followed by a swift exit. General Geldenhuys described the new strategy as: “comparable to what happens when an ant-hill is kicked open. The ants scatter, you search for them around their nest and they lead you to new nests...a combination of area operations, follow-ups, and search-and-destroy operations [are] launched to locate and destroy them.”67 Such an approach required a considerably higher South African tolerance for keeping forces inside Angolan territory than it had typically exercised prior to 1979 (with the exception of Operation Savannah, in which South Africa believed U.S. support would be forthcoming). Scholz summarizes the change: “Operation Sceptic...was an important development in the Border War. Its predecessors, operations Reindeer, Rekstok and Saffraan, had been limited in scope and time. Sceptic evolved into a much longer operation, during which People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) was hunted deep within its own rear areas in Angola for about three weeks. Apart from Savannah, this was the biggest and longest operation the SADF had been involved in since 1945.”68 Steenkamp concurs: Sceptic was “a far more ambitious venture than any of the previous external operations.”69

South Africa’s greater comfort with escalation continued after Operation Sceptic, and is confirmed by participants in the conflict. General Opperman and Ambassador Zazeraj, for example, both confirm that South African tolerance for escalation increased in the 1980s, while historian Piero Gleijeses argues that South African elites “ratcheted up the pressure on South Africa’s neighbors.”70 Throughout the rest of 1980 and early 1981, South Africa launched operations inside Angola, including Operation Klipklop in July 1980, and Operation Carnation, which ran from June 20 to early August 1981.71 In May 1981, however, senior SADF officials concluded that they had to operate in Angola on a more sustained basis, and “dominate a territory, instead of going in after specific bases and leaving again afterwards.”72 The resulting discussions lead to Operation Protea. Protea used over 4,000 troops and would turn out to be both the largest SADF operation in the entire Border War and the largest

67. Geldenhuys, At The Front, 129.
68. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War.
69. Steenkamp, South Africa’s Border War, 92.
70. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014; author interview with Ambassador Victor Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014; Gleijeses, Visions of Freedom, 186.
71. Steenkamp, South Africa’s Border War, 97–98; Geldenhuys, At The Front, 154–155.
72. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 120.
mechanized operation by the South African Army since World War II. Protea marked a further increase in South African aggression. For the first time South African forces took a semi-permanent occupying role within the province of Cunene, and the invasion was "so brazen that it provoked widespread condemnation from Western governments." Such operations could not be undertaken without escalating the conflict. And, indeed, the Angolan army, the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) joined in the conflict between PLAN and the SADF on PLAN's side. The Cubans also began to play an increasing role, with Cuban pilots flying MiG-21s close to the combat zone (with one Cuban-piloted MiG-21 shot down by a South African Mirage), and the Soviet Union delivered T-54 and T-55 tanks and anti-aircraft missiles to FAPLA. While South Africa had previously sought to avoid such escalation, such concerns appeared less binding after 1979. South Africa followed Operation Protea with further operations "like waves in the wake of Protea." Operation Daisy, another major operation which targeted territory 300km inside Angola—the deepest into Angola that the SADF would ever seek to strike during the Border War, was followed by other significant operations—Operation Makro in December 1981-January 1982, Operation Meebos I in March 1982, and Operation Meebos II in July and August of 1982—all aimed at destroying SWAPO capabilities but with far less sensitivity to escalation than South Africa had previously exhibited.

While 1982 saw some largely unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, the war continued at a low level with regular contacts between the SADF and SWAPO on and around the Angolan-Namibian border, occasional South African operations over the Angolan border, and continued South African violations of Angolan airspace, something that South African officials no longer sought to hide. While such sorties were primarily for reconnaissance purposes, they occasionally engaged Angolan forces, and shot down an Angolan MiG-21 in October 1982. South Africa also continued to assist UNITA, facilitating a large expansion of the territory under its control and supporting a full-scale UNITA assault on an Angolan garrison at Cangamba.

---

77. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, 162.
killing 120 Cuban forces. Further, the escalation that South Africa most feared and had previously sought to avoid—a larger-scale Soviet involvement in Angola—was becoming increasingly likely. Increasing quantities of Soviet materiel was flowing into Angola, and a South African official in the United States was handed a note in November 1983 from a Soviet diplomat stating that “South Africa’s continued occupation of Angolan soil and support for UNITA was unacceptable...the USSR would give Luanda all the support it needed to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Whereas before 1979 South Africa sought to avoid such escalation and controlled its operations accordingly, South Africa responded to this Soviet threat by engaging in Operation Askari, a large-scale operation aimed at destroying SWAPO’s ability to launch an assault into South West Africa in early 1984. In particular, South Africa sought to force FAPLA forces in the Angolan provinces of Cahama, Mulondo, Caiundo and Cuvelai to retreat, and sought to dominate the approach routes that SWAPO would use in the event of an assault on South West Africa. Askari was a significant operation, requiring large numbers of forces deep inside Angola for long periods of time. South African military leaders anticipated that the operation would last for two months, and an SADF planning document acknowledged that achieving South Africa’s goals in the conflict would be “time-consuming.” Again, the result of South African aggression was conflict escalation: “with the growing role of the Soviet Union...outside factors grew in importance, while South African control over the course of the war diminished.” As in the aftermath of Operation Protea, Askari led to a short-lived and unsuccessful effort to achieve a peace settlement. This did not stop further SADF actions deep inside Angolan territory: in July 1984, South African Special Forces Commandos destroyed an oil pipeline in Angola’s northernmost province, which led to the loss of 42,000 barrels of oil, and an Angolan and East German ship were damaged by mines that had been laid by the South Africans in the Luanda harbor. Major conventional operations also continued, in addition to acts of sabotage and covert operations, with Operation Boswilger and

79. Ibid., 112.
81. Ibid., 167.
82. Ibid., 184.
83. Ibid., 187–191.
Operation Egret being undertaken inside Angolan territory in 1985, and the war continuing to escalate until the late 1980s.

Overall, therefore, South Africa appears to have become more aggressive in the conflict in the period immediately following nuclear acquisition.

Did South Africa also become more willing to compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition? Overall, there is little evidence that South Africa became more willing to compromise in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons. While periodic peace initiatives were launched throughout the period, South Africa’s demands remained largely constant. The basic South African negotiating position throughout the period, as articulated by Foreign Minister Pik Botha, was that “we were not ready to exchange on the Cunene [River, marking the border between Namibia and Angola] for a war on the Orange [River, marking the border between Namibia and South Africa]...if Southwest Africa was governed by SWAPO there would be a serious risk that the Russians would threaten South Africa from that territory.”

While South Africa accepted an independent Namibia in principle, it did not want to withdraw from South West Africa as long as doing so might increase the threat to South African territory. This position later became labelled as the principle of “linkage”: that the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola and an end to SWAPO attacks within South West Africa were a prerequisite for a process which would lead to Namibian independence. In reality, this meant that negotiations over the future of South West Africa were something of a sham. South African elites recognized that a free election in Namibia would lead to SWAPO coming to power, an outcome that was unacceptable for South Africa and that precluded a full-scale South African withdrawal from South West Africa without major changes in South Africa’s security environment. Overall, therefore, South Africa did not become more willing to compromise in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons.

It seems reasonably clear that South Africa engaged in increased aggression in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and did not engage in greater efforts to compromise. However, whether South Africa also engaged in greater steadfastness in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, as

---

Hypothesis 2 would anticipate, is less clear. Even in the period prior to nuclear acquisition, South Africa responded forcefully to SWAPO attacks inside South West Africa, but merely restrained itself in terms of operations inside Angolan territory that aimed at degrading SWAPO's capability to launch attacks. In the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South Africa continued to respond forcefully to SWAPO attacks, but also engaged in more aggressive preemptive actions aimed at destroying SWAPO's military capabilities and reducing its capacity to plan and execute attacks. Thus, it is hard to identify any substantial changes in South Africa's levels of steadfastness over the period of nuclear acquisition. Instead, the change in South Africa's foreign policy seems to have been largely an increase in aggression. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not confirmed—nuclear opportunism anticipates an increase in South African steadfastness that we do not observe in the historical evidence.

4.3.2 Independence, bolstering, and expansion

What about the remaining three behaviors? Did South Africa engage in greater levels of independence, defined as becoming more willing to take actions that its allies opposed? Did South Africa seek to strengthen its allies and thus engage in greater levels of bolstering? And did South Africa engage in expansion—widening its interests in international politics? South Africa's increasing international isolation over the time period makes assessing these claims reasonably straightforward, because South Africa lacked allies that it would have sought independence from, and allies that it could have plausibly sought to bolster. South Africa was "the skunk of the world," and South African foreign policy calculations were made on the basic assumption that "we were on our own." As a result, I argue that South Africa did not engage in greater levels of either bolstering or independence in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

The only actor that could have plausibly restrained South Africa in the pre-nuclear period, and from whom South Africa might have sought independence from in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, would have been the United States. And indeed, as discussed above, South Africa's nuclear posture was in large part aimed at encouraging U.S. intervention in southern

88. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014; author interview with Ambassador Victor Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014.
Africa if the conventional situation escalated beyond South Africa’s ability to control it. In truth, however, South African elites did not view the United States as committed in any way to providing for South Africa’s security. Indeed, this assessment of American ambivalence about South African security was part of the reason for the catalytic nuclear strategy, since it was believed that absent South African nuclear weapons, the United States would be highly unlikely to assist South Africa.  

As discussed above, the South Africans felt that the United States had left them in the lurch during Operation Savannah, and from that point on they regarded the United States as (at best) a fickle and unreliable ally. As Major General Opperman recalls, “I think the United States lost all their credibility as an ally during Operation Savannah. We realized that the United States had only one interest, and that was their personal interest in the situation...I don’t think we ever considered the Americans to be reliable.” Major General Johann Dippenaar describes the lack of reliability of U.S. patronage, saying “one day they [the United States] will support you, the next day there will be a vote and they will say, ‘Stop the support’.” South Africans recognized that although there were elements (particularly within the Republican party) within the U.S. Congress and executive branch who were inclined to support them, there were also powerful forces pushing in the opposite direction, both inside and outside the government. South African Diplomat Pieter Snyman, who served in Washington, recalls that “we had good friends in Congress and in the administration, but [we knew that] they [might] succumb to the pressure of their own [anti-apartheid] constituencies.” In Major General de Vries’ words, “I don’t think the United States was seen as an ally for our counterinsurgency war in South-West Africa and southern Angola. They dropped us with Operation Savannah, and the South Africans were mad at them....They weren’t our allies; there was no support from Americans on the ground. So we didn’t like them that much.” Scholtz confirms that “the Americans lost all the political capital and influence they had with the South African

89. Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era, 216.
90. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
91. Author interview with Major General Johann Dippenaar (retired), Pretoria, June 30, 2014.
93. Phone interview with Major General Roland de Vries (retired), September 9, 2014.

172
government, who regarded Washington as having left them in the lurch."94

As a result, South Africa did not feel constrained by the need to maintain support from Washington, because they did not feel they were getting much American support, and certainly did not believe that the United States was a core contributor to South African security. General de Vries confirms that South Africa did not, therefore, fear the loss of U.S. support. As a result, South Africa was able in large part to “ignore the bad reputation and the snide remarks that came from countries such as the Western powers,” because it did not cost South Africa anything to do so.95 South Africa certainly faced constraints on its actions in the Border War, as discussed above, but they were typically constraints imposed by fears of escalation rather than constraints imposed by fears of a withdrawal of Western support. As a result, in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South Africa does not appear to have engaged in greater independence from Washington. In fact, the South African relationship with Washington became closer in the 1980s. However, this was not due to South Africa’s nuclear weapons but due to the Reagan administration’s greater ideological sympathy for the apartheid regime and the reduced priority it placed on human rights promotion within its foreign policy. This greater warmth from Washington manifested itself in the Reagan administration placing a lower priority on encouraging domestic reform within South Africa, and the greater tolerance of the Reagan administration for South African efforts to circumvent international sanctions.

South Africa also lacked allies that it would have felt any inclination to bolster. As Theresa Papenfus concludes in her biography of Pik Botha, “after Operation Savannah it was clearer than ever that South Africa had no friends.”96 While South Africa had proxies which it supported in pursuit of its regional goals (notably UNITA in Angola and the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) in Mozambique), these were not states that South Africa could use nuclear weapons to bolster. Instead, increased South African support to these groups is better seen as aggression against the states that South Africa was using its proxies to target. Aside from the United States, South Africa’s most meaningful relationship over the period was with

94. Scholtz, The SADF in the Border War, 27.
95. Phone interview with Major General Roland de Vries (retired), September 9, 2014.
96. Theresa Papenfus, Pik Botha And His Times (Pretoria: Litera Publications, 2010), 541.
Israel, with whom South Africa enjoyed an important, though highly secretive, relationship.\textsuperscript{97} The South Africa-Israel relationship brought South Africa significant dividends in terms of access to Israel’s advanced conventional weaponry and nuclear technologies, and South African military officials frequently found themselves in Israel to shepherd through such deals. Major General Dippenaar, for example, recalls being posted to Israel as an “agricultural advisor,” although in reality he was there to learn from the way the Israelis conducted mobile warfare and to facilitate “transferring technologies which would then help with the development of other weapon systems.”\textsuperscript{98}

Despite its importance, the South African-Israeli relationship was largely transactional and based on mutually beneficial material exchanges: technology and arms transfers from Israel to South Africa, and natural resource (including large quantities of uranium) and currency transfers in the opposite direction. As Polakow-Suransky summarizes the relationship in his authoritative history of the alliance, “Israel profited handsomely from arms exports and South Africa gained access to cutting-edge weaponry at a time when the rest of the world was turning against the apartheid state...Israel denied its ties with South Africa, claiming that it opposed apartheid...even as it secretly strengthened the arsenal of a white supremacist government.”\textsuperscript{99}

The transactional nature of the relationship, the vast distances between the two countries, and the more immediate defense priorities that both countries felt, meant that South Africa felt no inclination to itself provide for Israel’s security directly, and so South Africa did not consider it politically attractive to seek to bolster Israel’s position in the Middle East in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. As a result, there is little evidence that the relationship changed in its aims or scope as South Africa acquired nuclear weapons: substantial conventional arms transfers continued much as before. Indeed, the secrecy of the South African-Israeli relationship in both countries meant that any public bolstering of either state by the other would have been deeply politically challenging.

As a result, South Africa does not appear to have engaged in either greater levels of


\textsuperscript{98} Author interview with Major General Johann Dippenaar (retired), Pretoria, June 30, 2014.

\textsuperscript{99} Polakow-Suransky, The Unspoken Alliance, 6.
bolstering or independence in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

Nor did South Africa give any thought to engaging in expansion. South Africa was a state desperately seeking to hold on to its position in Southern Africa. Over the period of nuclear acquisition, South Africa was increasingly being buffeted from both within and without as it faced increasing Soviet and Cuban forces in neighboring countries, increasing diplomatic isolation, increasingly stringent anti-apartheid sanctions, increasing domestic instability, and economic turmoil. For South Africa, maintaining its international position and domestic political institutions was becoming more and more challenging. As a result, it would have been highly surprising if South Africa had significantly expanded its interests in world politics in response to nuclear acquisition. And, indeed, while South Africa frequently went on the offense in Southern Africa, its strategic goals were ultimately defensive and status quo oriented: to maintain its position. In Scholtz’s words, “the South African posture was offensive on the tactical, operational, and military strategic levels, but defensive on the security-strategic level...the government wanted primarily to preserve the status quo, but realised that a defensive military strategy and operational and tactical approach would not be sufficient.”100 No new alliances were entered into in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, nor did South Africa initiate disputes with countries within which it did not already have longstanding interests. In the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South African foreign policy thus remained firmly focused on the Frontline States, on its longstanding relationship with Israel, and on its fractious relationship with the United States, and held the ultimate goal of maintaining, not expanding, South Africa’s position. Hypothesis 5 is, therefore, confirmed: South Africa does not appear to have used nuclear weapons to pursue expansion.

4.4 South African thinking about nuclear weapons

There is therefore evidence that South African behavior changed at the point of nuclear acquisition, and that South Africa became more aggressive in the Border War in Angola. But was this caused by nuclear acquisition? This section examines South African elite thinking

about the utility of nuclear weapons. South African elites are not typically willing to state explicitly that they believed nuclear weapons were useful in facilitating aggression. Indeed, this is not surprising for two reasons. First, a very small group of South African elites actually knew about the nuclear program. Second, the renunciation of South Africa’s nuclear program and the strategic rationale behind it, and South Africa’s subsequent commitment to non-proliferation was a core part of South Africa’s efforts to rejoin the international community in the early 1990s. Indeed, as a result, South African officials are often reluctant to acknowledge that South Africa’s nuclear weapons had any strategic value at all. Nonetheless, from the statements of military and political elites one can piece together a coherent causal logic linking nuclear weapons to increased South African aggression. Specifically, South African elites confirm that South African foreign policy and conduct in the Border War was constrained by the need to avoid potential escalation; that nuclear weapons would allow South Africa to better control that escalation should it happen; and that South African elites became more tolerant of escalation, and were thus prepared to engage in greater aggression, in the period after acquiring nuclear weapons. Together, this evidence suggests that South African elites did indeed believe that nuclear weapons facilitated aggression.

4.4.1 Concerns about escalation

First, fears about conflict escalation were a major constraint on South African behavior throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and those fears of escalation frequently prevented South African aggression. The fear was primarily due to the Soviet Union, which had the ability to escalate the conflicts on South Africa’s borders (particularly in Angola) by providing equipment and further forces. As a result, South Africa consistently sought not to give the Soviet Union any excuse to escalate the conflict. As General Opperman recalls: “right throughout the war there was an element of restraint...the types of weaponry used; the sort of targets engaged...would it result in unnecessary escalation?"\(^\text{101}\) Major General Roland de Vries, who commanded major operations in Angola, argues similarly that “it had to be played very carefully because

\(^{101}\) Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
the conflict could have developed into a regional war." Major General Johann Dippenaar, who also commanded operations in Angola, recalls that “politics put a lot of restrictions on all operations...So there was a constant caution.” These constraints affected South African conduct of the Border War in a number of ways.

South African goals in individual operations were circumscribed by fears of escalation. For example, South Africa sought to restrict the geographical zones in which it operated in order to reduce the fears of escalation. Major General Opperman recalls commanding “an operation 250 kilometers deep inside Zambia [in which] I was forced to withdraw overnight, although at that stage we had not yet achieved all the things that we wanted to achieve militarily. In fact, I would have liked to stay there for another week or two, but we were told to withdraw overnight...instead of continuing and doing what you believed had to be done from a military point of view, you had to withdraw...one of the constant factors to be considered was: would it result in unnecessary escalation of the war?” Breytenbach confirms that South Africa had the capacity to hold significant territory that they did not hold for fear of escalation, arguing that “we could have taken over the Cunene Province, for instance—we used to go in there quite often to go sort out SWAPO. So we could have gone in there with three battalions and keep them there, but then of course the Russians would come back en masse,” escalating the conflict.

Major General Roland de Vries recalls similar constraints: “There were constraints...in terms of how far you could go. Can you attack Menongue? No. Can we attack Cuito Cuanavale from the west? No. Rather, stay on the eastern side of the river so that the war does not escalate.”

South Africa also conducted its operations in ways that aimed to minimize the threat of escalation. In many cases, this meant secrecy. In Operation Savannah, Major General Opperman recalls that “our government had hoped that by going in covertly, we would prevent the situation from escalating much more rapidly.” South African forces “had the capability” to take the Angolan capital Luanda in that operation, but restrained themselves in large part

102. Phone interview with Major General Roland de Vries (retired), September 9, 2014.
103. Author interview with Major General Johann Dippenaar (retired), Pretoria, June 30, 2014.
104. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
105. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
106. Phone interview with Major General Roland de Vries (retired), September 9, 2014.
107. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
out of fears of escalation. Ambassador Shearar confirms that going to Luanda “would have opened the door for anyone else to come in,” and recalls that this concern was expressed explicitly by the Foreign Minister at Oubos, the Prime Minister’s residence. In other cases, the desire to control escalation meant ensuring that exit routes existed for South African advisors to other participants in the Angolan war. As an advisor to both the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and UNITA, Breytenbach recalls that “[t]he first thing you get sorted out is your escape route to get out...you must be able to get away quickly...when things start getting wrong, then you must get out...You always have a standby plane or vehicle or something that you can get into and be gone.”

Targeting was also carefully calibrated in order to minimize the threat of escalation. In particular, the South Africans sought to avoid direct conflict with Russian forces in order to avoid triggering deeper Soviet involvement in the region. As Ambassador Victor Zazeraj recalls, “very often there were Russian pilots flying...at the same time as our pilots, who could hear them on the radio communications and knew the markings on the planes. There was an unspoken rule that if it was a Russian pilot or even a Cuban pilot, the South African Air Force wouldn’t interfere with them too much...You don’t want to scratch the bear and create a problem that you can’t solve. We would not have wanted to draw them in, or created a pretext that would allow them to do us more harm than we could cope with.” Indeed, Soviet forces may have intentionally facilitated this mutual restraint by separating themselves from the Angolan and Cuban forces. Ambassador Zazeraj noted that “the Russians were no worse at apartheid than we were...their officers were not living in the same camp as the rest of them [and] made sure you could see from the air which was their camp—they had big hammers and sickles on their tents.” This enabled South African restraint: “our Air Force would be told not to hit the Russian camp...you don’t want to have a missile go in and upset them, because then you would have a crisis.”

Finally, the South African government also sought to exercise high levels of centralized

108. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
110. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
111. Author interview with Ambassador Victor Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014.
control over operations. Some South African elites involved in decisionmaking at the time claim that Pretoria exercised only weak control over what the SADF was doing in the field, and that many SADF operations were not officially sanctioned by Pretoria. David Steward, for example, argues that “very often [the SADF] didn’t tell the Department of Foreign Affairs about their adventures.” Such claims must be evaluated with skepticism because of the incentive that members of the apartheid regime have to claim they lacked knowledge about, and did not authorize, specific operations. The weight of evidence, however, suggests exactly the opposite: that Pretoria exercised very tight control over individual operations, and did so precisely because of concerns about escalation. As Major General Gert Opperman recalls, “we never had carte blanche. We were always very aware...that the politicians were in charge.” Major General Dippenaar recalls that “every time before operations could take place, we had to have approval—and there was no chance you could have done anything without political approval from our side. And then all those approvals came out with very strict conditions: you can’t be longer than this; you can’t take more than that kind of vehicle; [etc].” Breytenbach confirms that “every time we went across the border it was planned at the highest level, and there were Generals sitting there on this planning committee with the Minister of Defence,” while General Geldenuys writes that: “a decision to cross the border was a political one for which the government and the Minister of Defence carried the responsibility.” Breytenbach recalls that new orders were given on a daily basis in order to keep commanders on the tightest possible leash, and individual commanders were often unaware of the ultimate goals of the missions they were undertaking. While former military commanders may have an incentive to claim they were under strict orders so as to minimize their personal and collective responsibility for some of the less savory activities that occurred during the Border War, some political elites also agreed that tight political control was exercised over military operations. Ambassador Zazeraj confirms that “the kind of control [by Pretoria] you speak of was very much the case—they

113. Author interview with David Steward, Johannesburg, June 6, 2014.
114. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
115. Author interview with Major General Johann Dippenaar (retired), Pretoria, June 30, 2014.
116. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014; Geldenhuys, At The Front, 93.
117. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014; George, Cuban Intervention in Angola, 70.
really did not want the situation to get out of control...the political elite was dead scared that something would create an international incident." 118 This micro-management of operations by Pretoria caused tensions in civil-military relations. Major General de Vries recalls that “the high command started micro-managing the battle front, which was highly infuriating for the commanders on the ground.” 119 And officers who exceeded the bounds of their authority were punished. General Opperman recalls that “Colonel Jan Breytenbach—who was one of our best tactical commanders on the ground—he decided on his own to undertake patrols in Zimbabwe, and he was severely reprimanded because he was told that, ‘your undisciplined actions, your initiative, might make military sense, but it would escalate the war and we don’t want that.’” 120

Overall, the fear of escalation constrained South African aggression in the Border War in a number of ways: South Africa was extremely cautious about the nature, scale, and scope of its operations in order to avoid provoking potential Soviet intervention.

### 4.4.2 Nuclear weapons and conflict escalation

Nuclear weapons were seen by South African elites as granting South Africa greater ability to control the risks associated with conflict escalation.

In examining South African thinking surrounding the utility of the nuclear program it is important to note the limited number of people involved in discussions of South Africa’s nuclear strategy. Very few officials even knew of the existence of the nuclear program, and there was little discussion of the nuclear program within the South African government. Thus, while many in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs were skeptical of the utility of nuclear weapons for a state like South Africa that never lost its conventional military advantage in the region, 121 their views were marginalized within the South African decisionmaking process. After 1978, the State Security Council “replaced the cabinet as the dominant institution in the formulation of foreign policy.” 122 The State Security Council was dominated by the more hawkish views of President PW Botha, Defence Minister Magnus Malan,

---

118. Author interview with Ambassador Victor Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014.
119. Phone interview with Major General Roland de Vries (retired), September 9, 2014.
120. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
121. For example, see author interview with Ambassador Jeremy Shearar (retired), Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
and its “powerful secretariat was headed by a general and staffed by military officers.” Major General Opperman, the Military Secretary to Defence Minister Magnus Malan, confirms that the views of President Botha and Defence Minister Malan “dominated the discussion,” and that both believed that nuclear weapons served a “clear political purpose.” That political purpose was, in large part, to grant South Africa greater capacity to control escalation. As Major General Opperman recalls, “I think...the fear of escalation, from a nuclear point of view, was also very prominent [in the reasons for nuclear acquisition].”

Indeed, the nuclear strategy that South Africa adopted—the so-called “three stage” strategy—was explicitly designed to provide multiple points within a conflict at which nuclear weapons could influence the escalation calculations of opponents and allies. According to André Buys, the strategy was “absolutely” aimed at improving South Africa’s ability to control escalation. The strategy was designed so that it would only “go live” if the conflict in Angola escalated to a point at which South African elites felt it threatened the survival of the state. Thus, South African nuclear weapons aimed to provide South Africa with more options should the conflict on South Africa’s borders begin to escalate beyond Pretoria’s capacity to control. As Major General Dippenaar described the purpose of South Africa’s nuclear weapons, “even if things go terribly wrong, there is some way of responding and reacting.”

As André Buys describes the nuclear strategy: “the concern was that this [the Angolan conflict] would escalate to a point where we would not be able to curtail it. And so the question was then, what do we do then?” Buys continues: “the first stage was that we would keep it secret, and for that, you don’t need any physical hardware—the strategy of uncertainty, just keep them guessing. The second stage was that if the military threat escalates to the point where we want to start activating the deterrent strategy, we would tell the United States—you had Ronald Reagan as president, we had Margaret Thatcher in Britain, these were people our politicians could talk to and they could be informed: ‘we’ve got this problem, but we’ve got

123. Ibid.
124. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
125. Author interview with Major General Gert Opperman (retired), Pretoria, June 23, 2014.
126. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
127. Author interview with Major General Johann Dippenaar (retired), Pretoria, June 30, 2014.
128. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
nuclear weapons, so please try and intervene and get the pressure off." This is the catalytic strategy that Narang and others identify. At a particular conflict threshold—perhaps the invasion of South West Africa (Namibia) by large numbers of conventional forces—South Africa would have communicated to Washington its intention to conduct a nuclear test.

Indeed, Foreign Minister Pik Botha explicitly promised President Reagan that South Africa would not test without first informing Washington. The purpose of such a threat would have been to use the American desire to avoid overt proliferation to persuade the United States to intervene—whether diplomatically to persuade the Soviet Union to restrain its own clients, or militarily by providing South Africa with conventional reinforcements.

However, South Africa’s nuclear strategy included plans beyond mere threats of testing, because, in Buys’ words, such threats “might not work...if that [threatening to test] didn’t work, the third strategy was then the open strategy—we would detonate one underground. If that brings sense to the military threat, if the threat is relieved, then OK. If it is not, the idea was that we would demonstrate a nuclear weapon. And what we had in mind was to actually go and do a mock attack with a nuclear weapon over the ocean—fly out and actually detonate a nuclear weapon a thousand kilometres south of South Africa in the ocean.”

This basic strategy—which had been approved as early as April 1978—thus provided opportunities for South African elites to tamp down escalation at several points in a potential conventional conflict. Indeed, South African elites considered adding a fourth stage to the strategy, which would have provided another point at which South Africa’s nuclear capabilities could have been used to control escalation. As Buys describes, “There was a lot of discussion about whether we should add a fourth step or not—it was never officially added, but the debate was, if that [a test over the ocean] doesn’t work and they still attack South Africa—do we actually use it tactically? It was never approved by the politicians and thank God we never got near

129. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
133. Author interview with André Buys, Pretoria, July 1, 2014.
134. Von Wielligh and Von Wielligh-Steyn, The Bomb, 133.
that—but it was certainly discussed...We said that there might be a need for a fourth stage to the strategy, but it was never approved, which would have entailed tactical use on troops when they crossed our borders." Consistent with this account of considering more sophisticated nuclear capabilities (including tactical capabilities), South Africa toyed with designs for tactical nuclear weapons and alternative delivery systems including ballistic missiles and artillery guns, but such devices were never approved for construction.

At the time, South African elites also made public but ambiguous threats that aimed to dissuade South African opponents from escalating the conflict. P.W. Botha, for example, gave a speech in 1979 in which he stated that “South Africa’s enemies may possibly find out that we have military weapons they don’t know about,” while other ministers made public reference on other occasions to a “secret weapon.” And, indeed, the threat of nuclear escalation did reduce the willingness of Cuban forces to take particular escalatory steps, thus easing the dangers associated with South African escalation. Ambassador Zazeraj recalls that: “We only had confirmation [that the Cubans had changed their behavior out of fear of South African nuclear weapons] in 2010—we had a meeting with Jorge Risquet [Fidel Castro’s point man on Africa] who confirmed that the Cubans in Angola were convinced that South Africa had nuclear warheads attached to its G5 and G6 artillery. And for that reason, Cuban troops never came anywhere near the Namibian border, and never came near the South Africans. They were also split up in different areas, so that if we did attack them with nuclear weapons, we wouldn’t wipe all of them out.” In addition, Fidel Castro himself acknowledged the role of nuclear weapons in constraining Cuban behavior, writing: “Our troops advanced at night...in groups of no more than 1,000 men, strongly armed, at a prescribed distance from one another, always keeping in mind the possibility that the enemy might use nuclear weapons.”

Overall, therefore, nuclear weapons were seen as providing South Africa with a tool that enabled them to control the risks associated with conflict escalation. Consistent with this aim,
South African elites set up their nuclear strategy in a way that allowed them to attempt to control escalation at several different conflict thresholds within an escalating conflict.

4.4.3 Connecting nuclear weapons to increased aggression

If nuclear weapons allow a state to better control escalation, they reduce the downside risks associated with aggression because even if an act of aggression leads to substantial escalation, or leads to a response from the adversary that the state is unprepared for, possessing nuclear weapons provides a state with additional options in responding to, and controlling, such a situation. As a result, nuclear weapons can reduce the expected costs of engaging in activities that risk such escalation, such as aggression. Thus, even if South African elites are reluctant to state explicitly that they believed that nuclear weapons facilitated aggression, a clear causal chain—with each stage verified by South African elites—links South African nuclear acquisition to an acknowledged increase in South Africa’s tolerance for escalation and ability to engage in aggression.

Given that South African aggression was constrained by fears of escalation and that South African officials believed nuclear weapons helped them to control escalation, it is not surprising that, as described above, South Africa engaged in greater aggression after acquiring nuclear weapons. And, indeed, at least some officials are prepared to acknowledge that they believed nuclear weapons facilitated the more aggressive operations that South Africa undertook in the 1980s. For example, Ambassador Victor Zazeraj states that: "The military felt that nuclear weapons had a purpose. The military thought that as long as their enemy believed that South Africa had nuclear weapons and acted accordingly, it made their lives a whole lot easier. In some ways I think they were right...it did work."140 Overall, even if former South African officials are generally (and unsurprisingly) unwilling to confirm directly that nuclear possession facilitated their aggression, the circumstantial evidence suggests that nuclear weapons may have played a role. South African elites felt constrained by concerns about escalation; viewed nuclear weapons as a tool that could be used to control escalation and thus reduce the downside risks associated with aggression; and, after acquiring nuclear weapons, substantially increased their

140. Author interview with Ambassador Victor Zazeraj, Johannesburg, July 4, 2014, emphasis added.
tolerance for such escalation in Angola.

4.5 Alternative explanations

This section examines the performance of the three alternative explanations. The theory of nuclear opportunism performs well, but does not perform perfectly in the South African case. Nuclear opportunism correctly anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, but it also anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate increased steadfastness which we do not observe in the historical record. Nuclear opportunism correctly predicts that South Africa would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate the other four behaviors in response to nuclear acquisition.

The first alternative explanation is offered by S. Paul Kapur’s strategic pessimism. What does this explanation predict about South African behavior, and are those predictions borne out in the historical record? As discussed in Section 2.5, two variables determine the predicted outcomes in Kapur’s theory. The first variable is whether the state is conventionally weak vis-à-vis its opponents. As discussed above, although South Africa faced serious threats during the period in which it acquired nuclear weapons, it never lost (or came close to losing) its conventional superiority over its opponents.141 Because the theory of strategic pessimism requires both conventional weakness and revisionist preferences in order to make a prediction of emboldenment in the form of conventional aggression, whether or not South Africa had revisionist preferences does not alter the predictions made. However, whether South Africa had revisionist preferences is somewhat unclear. South Africa certainly had status quo preferences at a strategic level—it sought to preserve its position in southern Africa and uphold the domestic political institutions of apartheid in the face of increasing international isolation and condemnation. However, South Africa also had some revisionist preferences with respect to its neighbors at a tactical level (for example, seeking the fall of the MPLA government in Angola). Regardless of this coding decision, however, Kapur would not predict that South African aggression would be observed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and would anticipate

little effect of nuclear acquisition on South African foreign policy. While this alternative explanation does make a number of correct predictions, the evidence suggests that the theory of strategic pessimism crucially misses the important way in which nuclear acquisition did affect South African foreign policy: by facilitating conventional aggression.

Defensive realism provides the second alternative explanation. This explanation predicts that nuclear weapons would make South Africa more secure, and thus that South Africa would have less need to engage in aggression, expansion, or bolstering—all of which are behaviors driven by insecurity in the defensive realist world view. However, the theory predicts that states may display greater steadfastness, independence, and compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Defensive realism makes several correct predictions in the South African case: South Africa did not engage in expansion or bolstering. But, in contrast to the predictions of defensive realism, South Africa did engage in greater levels of aggression, and did not display greater steadfastness, independence, nor a greater inclination to compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Thus, while defensive realism makes a number of correct predictions, it does not perform as well as the theory of nuclear opportunism.

The third and final alternative explanation draws on the idea of the nuclear taboo becoming increasingly strong over time. This explanation predicts that states acquiring nuclear weapons late in the nuclear era would experience smaller foreign policy effects than those acquiring nuclear weapons early in the nuclear era, because of the declining credibility of the threat of nuclear acquisition. South Africa acquired a nuclear capability nearly 35 years into the nuclear era, well after the norm of nuclear non-use had emerged and had begun to constrain state behavior.\(^{142}\) As a result, the nuclear taboo should have reduced the relevance of South Africa’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons should therefore have had little effect on South African foreign policies. The taboo-based explanation, therefore, makes a prediction that nuclear weapons would have no effect on South African foreign policies. It thus makes a number of correct predictions because South Africa’s nuclear weapons resulted only in an increase in South African aggression. However, this explanation fails to predict that South Africa did use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. More broadly, this explanation wrongly

\(^{142}\) Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo.”
anticipates that South African elites would not acquire any benefits from nuclear weapons. In fact, South Africa clearly sought to gain benefits from having nuclear weapons and the fact that it did not engage in most of the behaviors did not result from the fact that nuclear weapons did not offer South Africa any benefits. Rather, it resulted from the fact that dealing with the threats on its borders was South Africa’s overwhelming political priority. As a result, South Africa used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression rather than the other foreign policy behaviors.

A final case-specific alternative explanation would be that the rise in South African elites’ tolerance for escalation occurred not because of nuclear weapons, but because of South Africa’s increasing conventional military capabilities, which gave them greater power projection capabilities. As Breytenbach points out, “It depends on capability—how deep you can go.”143 Similarly, David Steward argues that South Africa stopped its advance in Operation Savannah in 1975 because “our defence force was completely unprepared for an operation of this scale—it didn’t have artillery at that time, it had rudimentary 25 pounder cannons from the Second World War and it had overextended itself...By the 80s we had significantly improved our operational capability...and this increased the capability of the SADF to operate.”144 It is certainly true that South African defense expenditure and military manpower rose dramatically throughout the 1970s and 1980s. South African military expenditure rose from $359 million in 1970 to $2.24 billion in 1979 and $3.6 billion by 1989.145 This increase included expenditure on major new weapons systems (including the G5 and G6 artillery pieces, and the Cheetah fighter jet) that were commissioned and integrated into South Africa’s force structure over this period.146 The weight of evidence, however, would argue against this explanation. First, South African capabilities were growing constantly over the entire period, and there was not a relevant step-change in capabilities in 1979 that might explain the change in behavior observed. More importantly, the evidence suggests that capabilities were not the relevant constraint on South African behavior. After all, Operation Savannah proved that South Africa

143. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
144. Author interview with David Steward, Johannesburg, June 6, 2014.
145. Military expenditure figures are taken from the Correlates of War project, and are in 2010 U.S. dollars.
146. Figures on South African military expenditure used data from the Correlates of War Project.
Table 4.2: Relative performance of the four explanations in the South African case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Nuclear Pragmatism</th>
<th>Defensive Realism</th>
<th>Strategic Pessimism</th>
<th>Nuclear Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YES = change in behavior predicted; NO = no change in behavior predicted; UNCLEAR = indeterminate prediction; ✓ = correct prediction; ✗ = incorrect prediction

could conduct operations deep inside Angolan territory, but Savannah was undertaken only in anticipation of American support that failed to materialize. Such large-scale operations were not tolerated again until after South Africa had acquired a nuclear weapon, despite South Africa’s demonstrated ability to undertake them. Finally, the military capabilities that a state chooses to deploy are in large part endogenous to the state’s tolerance for escalation. And in the South African case, it is clear that at the point at which the South Africans wished to escalate, they provided their forces with the requisite military capabilities to do so. Breytenbach confirms that the government “gave you equipment that would allow you to go further in” when they wanted to do so.147 And, indeed, it was not simply the case that the war escalated in the aftermath of 1979 for reasons that were unrelated to South African actions, and that South Africa was simply forced to respond. The conflict escalated in 1979 in large part because South Africa chose to escalate it. In short, South Africa took actions after 1979 that it knew would escalate the conflict, and that it had not been willing to undertake before it acquired nuclear weapons.

Thus, although the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly in the South African case, none of the alternative explanations do better in explaining the ways in which South African foreign policy changed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Table 4.2 summarizes the correct and incorrect predictions made by each explanation.

147. Author interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Wilderness, June 20, 2014.
4.6 Conclusion

The evidence suggests that nuclear acquisition did affect South African foreign policy. South African tolerance for escalation in the Border War increased in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and South Africa became more willing to act aggressively in the conflict, taking actions that it had previously avoided due to the risk of escalation that they posed. This is consistent with South African elite thinking about nuclear weapons: South African elites saw nuclear weapons as a tool that would allow them to control the downside risks of conflict escalation associated with engaging in aggression. South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to engage in the other behaviors identified by the theory, an outcome largely (though not fully) consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism laid out in Section 2.3. As with the British case, the theory of nuclear opportunism outperforms the alternative explanations.
Chapter 5

United States

This chapter examines the ways that nuclear acquisition affected the foreign policies of the United States. As did the British and South African cases, the case of the United States provides considerable leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. First, the predictions made by the theory of nuclear opportunism laid out in Section 2.3 are different from those made by the alternative explanations and thus allow for a strong test of the theory against its competitors. Second, the variables that the theory of nuclear opportunism identifies as conditioning the effects of nuclear weapons themselves change significantly at the end of World War II. Because of this, the theory predicts changes in U.S. behavior both at the point of nuclear acquisition during the war and at the point at which those conditioning variables themselves change. In short, the theory anticipates that U.S. nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy differently during World War II and in the aftermath of the war. The case of the United States, therefore, essentially offers two cases with which to test the theory.

However, the U.S. case also presents important challenges. Because of the significant changes in the international system that occurred at the end of World War II, at almost the same time as the United States acquired (and used) nuclear weapons, there are reasons to expect that the United States would have changed its foreign policies even in the absence of nuclear weapons. This presents challenges for the analysis of the case, which I discuss in detail below. Similarly, the enormously complex, contested, and fast-changing international environment in the immediate aftermath of World War II makes distinguishing between several
of the behaviors hard in this case.

The theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that during World War II, the United States' political priority would have been to have improve the U.S. position against its enemies, and that the United States would therefore use nuclear weapons to escalate and end the war against Japan.¹ In the aftermath of World War II, the theory anticipates that the United States would use nuclear weapons to engage in expansion—the widening of the United States' interests—and bolstering of allies as a result of the low threat environment and uniquely favorable geopolitical environment in which the United States found itself. Although the theory does not perform perfectly, I argue that the theory nonetheless sheds significant light on the U.S. case. By contrast, defensive realism predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons to engage in greater levels of steadfastness, independence, and compromise; the theory of strategic pessimism anticipates little effect of nuclear acquisition on U.S. foreign policy; and the norms-based theory would anticipate a large effect of nuclear weapons but does not make determinate predictions about what those effects would be. The theory of nuclear opportunism, therefore, outperforms its competitors in the U.S. case.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, Section 5.1 outlines the utility of the U.S. case in testing the theory and describes the important challenges associated with the use of the U.S. case. Second, Section 5.2 examines the influence of nuclear acquisition on U.S. behavior during World War II. I describe the predictions that the theory of nuclear opportunism makes for U.S. wartime behavior, before examining the ways in which nuclear weapons altered U.S. conduct during World War II and the ways in which U.S. elites thought about the utility of nuclear weapons in this period. I argue that the United States saw nuclear weapons as a tool to escalate—and potentially end—the war against Japan and Germany, and ultimately used nuclear weapons for such purposes against Japan. This behavior is best characterized as aggression in terms of the typology introduced above. However, there are also ways in which U.S. nuclear weapons facilitated compromise in the terms of Japanese surrender, and independence from the Soviet Union in the Pacific, which are not anticipated by the theory.

¹ Germany had already been defeated at the point at which the United States acquired nuclear weapons, but the theory predicts that the United States would have used nuclear weapons in the same way against Germany had the war in Europe remained ongoing when the United States acquired nuclear weapons.
I then examine the performance of the alternative explanations in explaining U.S. wartime behavior. Third, Section 5.3 examines the ways in which nuclear weapons affected U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II. Again, I lay out the predictions made before examining U.S. foreign policy and the way in which U.S. elites thought about the utility of nuclear weapons in this period. I argue that nuclear weapons were used in place of conventional forces to facilitate a complex mix of expansion, aggression, steadfastness, and bolstering (of which expansion, steadfastness, and bolstering are predicted by the theory). Finally, I examine the performance of the alternative explanations in explaining U.S. behavior in the aftermath of World War II.

5.1 The utility of the U.S. case

The case of the United States provides significant leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism outlined in Section 2.3 for three reasons.

First, the U.S. case provides an excellent case with which to adjudicate the relative merits of the theory of nuclear opportunism and the alternative explanations because each makes differing predictions. As discussed in Section 2.5, the strategic pessimism school of thought anticipates that nuclear emboldenment in the form of aggression occurs only when weak, revisionist powers acquire nuclear weapons. The United States, a massively conventionally powerful state at the time it acquired nuclear weapons, does not meet this criteria. Kapur’s theory, therefore, anticipates that nuclear weapons would not be used to facilitate aggression in the U.S. case, and that nuclear weapons would not affect U.S. foreign policy in significant ways. Defensive realism anticipates that nuclear acquisition would lead to steadfastness, independence, and compromise, but that nuclear weapons would have no other effects in the U.S. case. The third alternative explanation, based on the nuclear taboo and the growing strength of norms of nuclear non-use, anticipates that nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy, because normative constraints against the use of nuclear weapons had not yet emerged, but does not make determinate predictions as to exactly how the United States would use its nuclear weapons. By contrast, and as I discuss in more detail below, the theory of nuclear
opportunism predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression during World War II, and then use nuclear weapons to facilitate significant expansion of its interests and bolstering of existing allies in the aftermath of World War II. The theory of nuclear opportunism thus makes unique predictions in the case of the United States.

Second, the variables that the theory of nuclear opportunism identifies as conditioning the effects of nuclear acquisition themselves change dramatically at the end of World War II. As a result, the U.S. case offers additional leverage in testing the theory because the theory suggests that nuclear weapons should affect U.S. foreign policy in different ways before and after the end of World War II. The U.S. case thus offers an extra set of observable implications (the U.S. case is, in essence, two cases) that provides additional leverage in testing the theory and assessing its performance against the alternative explanations.

Third, the U.S. case is in many ways an outlier and highly unusual relative to subsequent cases of proliferation. The United States was the first state to acquire nuclear weapons, meaning that U.S. policymakers lacked well established understandings of the ways in which nuclear weapons could be used or experiences of the ways in which other countries had thought about the utility of nuclear weapons. More broadly, the United States acquired nuclear weapons under historically highly unusual circumstances—at the conclusion of a total and brutal world war that would transform international politics. Similarly, the United States acquired nuclear weapons at a point at which the United States occupied a highly unusual position—by some distance the most powerful state in the international system. Thus, if the theory sheds any light on the U.S. case, in addition to cases in which states acquired nuclear weapons under more historically typical circumstances, that would offer significant validation of the theory.

Nonetheless, the U.S. case also presents two important challenges that are important to acknowledge. First, because the international system saw dramatic changes with the end of World War II, and the geopolitical circumstances of the United States changed dramatically as a result, the period in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons was one of considerable flux. There are therefore many reasons to think that U.S. foreign policy would have changed in important ways in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition even if the United States had not acquired nuclear weapons. This means that identifying the effects of nuclear acquisition is
somewhat harder, and a simple "before—after" comparison of U.S. behavior is likely to be less convincingly attributable to the effect of nuclear acquisition than in other cases where few other variables change simultaneously with nuclear acquisition. These concerns do not invalidate the research design, but they demand that we pay additional attention to examining the mechanisms by which nuclear weapons affected U.S. foreign policy, the way in which leaders thought about U.S. nuclear weapons, and think more carefully about the relevant counterfactuals (i.e., how the U.S. would have behaved in the absence of nuclear weapons) in the period after U.S. nuclear acquisition. The availability of a rich array of documentary evidence and a vast historical literature on U.S. foreign policy during this period means this can be feasibly accomplished.

Second, the aftermath of World War II saw a complex, contested and fast-changing international system. In such a world, distinguishing between several of the behaviors identified in the typology is extremely difficult, and harder than in the other cases examined in the dissertation. For example, establishing the nature of the status quo—necessary to distinguish between aggression and steadfastness—is extremely difficult in a situation of profound flux in which a range of political actors were in fact seeking to define exactly what the status quo was (or should) be. Similarly, defining the nature of the United States' pre-existing interests—key to distinguishing between expansion and aggression—is extremely challenging, because of the vast changes in the international system that were occurring. As a result, I focus less on categorizing behaviors that could plausibly be interpreted in different ways, but rather show the ways in which nuclear weapons affected these behaviors, regardless of how one labels them. In this way, the U.S. case offers a less clean test of the theory than other cases, but nonetheless offers a rich description of the ways in which nuclear weapons influenced the foreign policies of the United States.

2. The existence of a vast historiography on the origins of the Cold War that profoundly divides on these questions does not help in resolving these issues. See, for example, Howard Jones and Randall B. Woods, "Origins of the Cold War in Europe and the Near East: Recent Historiography and the National Security Imperative," in America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations Since 1945, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
5.2 U.S. conduct during World War II

This section examines the way in which nuclear weapons affected the U.S. conduct of World War II. My primary claim is that—in line with the predictions of nuclear opportunism—the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate vertical escalation of the war vis-à-vis Japan, but used them to pursue pre-existing goals—the defeat and surrender of Japan. The United States would have used nuclear weapons for similar purposes against Germany had the bomb been ready prior to German surrender. Although the extreme circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons make categorizing this behavior somewhat tricky, I argue that it is best thought of as aggression in the typology laid out in Section 2.2. Aggression includes the escalation of a conflict through the introduction of new weapons or technologies, which the use of nuclear weapons represented (and was perceived to represent by U.S. policymakers at the time). However, there are also ways in which the acquisition of nuclear weapons facilitated compromise. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to avoid a long and bloody invasion of Japan which would likely have ended with little U.S. inclination to compromise on any aspects of the terms of Japanese surrender, including the retention of the emperor. Nuclear weapons also facilitated U.S. independence from the Soviet Union by obviating the need for Soviet assistance in a potential invasion of Japan.

5.2.1 Predictions

What effects does the theory of nuclear opportunism predict that nuclear weapons would have on U.S. foreign policy when the U.S. acquired nuclear weapons during World War II? This section measures the variables identified in Section 2.3, and uses them to make a series of predictions for how nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy during World War II.

As described in Section 2.3, the first variable is whether or not the state acquiring nuclear weapons faces serious territorial threats or is involved in a war that requires the dedication of significant national resources. At the point at which the United States acquired a deliverable nuclear capability it was in the midst of World War II. The United States did not face ongoing fighting on its own territory (although it had, of course, suffered the 1941 attack on its territory
at Pearl Harbor) and at the point of nuclear acquisition U.S. victory in the Pacific was virtually inevitable (though the timing and manner of that victory was not) and victory in Europe had already been achieved. Nonetheless, World War II represented a brutal war that had demanded the expenditure of significant American blood and treasure in both Europe and the Pacific, and the United States was prepared to pay considerable further costs to achieve a complete victory should an invasion of Japan prove necessary. Because the United States was involved in an ongoing war, the other variables in the decision tree do not come into play. Figure 5.1 shows the application of the theory to the U.S. case at the point at which the United States acquired nuclear weapons.

Figure 5.1: Predictions in the U.S. case, wartime

1. State faces serious territorial threat/ongoing war? Yes
   Aggression & Steadfastness towards threat
   No
2. State has senior ally? Yes
   Independence from senior ally
   No
3. State is rising in power? Yes
   Expansion, Steadfastness, & bolstering of junior allies
   No
   Bolstering of junior allies & steadfastness towards rivals

Under such conditions, the theory anticipates that the United States' political priority would
be to improve its position against its enemies. As shown in Figure 5.1, the theory predicts that
the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness to this
end.

While these predictions seem straightforward, the context in which the United States
acquired nuclear weapons—in the midst of a total war in which the United States was on
the offensive and seeking to administer a knockout blow to Japan—mean they require some
elaboration. As discussed in Section 2.3, while the theory of nuclear opportunism argues that
states facing severe threats or in an ongoing war are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate
aggression and steadfastness, it does not specify which is likely to be the more dramatic effect.
However, states facing a favorable conventional balance of power should find it easy to maintain
high levels of steadfastness without nuclear weapons, and so nuclear acquisition is less likely
to be used to facilitate steadfastness. The United States at the end of World War II offers
something approximating the boundary condition for this qualification: by the summer of 1945,
U.S. victory in the war in the Pacific was close to inevitable and capabilities of the United States
dwarfed those of Japan. Of course, Japan could offer a robust defense of territory that it held.
U.S. losses in 1945 were significant in Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and elsewhere; the planned invasion
of Kyushu called for twenty-four divisions; and Truman feared that an invasion of Japan would
be extremely bloody: "an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other." But despite Japan’s
ability to subject U.S. forces to considerable losses, there is no doubt that the U.S. was on
the offensive and that Japan was no longer in any position to challenge the United States’
own territory. As a result, the theory expects to see the United States use nuclear weapons to
facilitate aggression rather than steadfastness during World War II. This leads to Hypothesis 1:

\[ H_{USA} \text{1: The United States should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression} \]
\[ \text{after acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1945.} \]

The theory also expects that the same logic would be reflected in elite thinking about
nuclear weapons. American elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a tool with which

---

3. "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House (18 June, 1945)," FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, The Conference of
Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), vol. 1, document 598, 903-910. See also Miscamble, The Most Controversial Decision,
48–49.
Table 5.1: Summary of predictions in the U.S. case, wartime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Where to look for evidence?</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The United States should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression after acquiring nuclear weapons in 1945</td>
<td>U.S. behavior during World War II</td>
<td>5.2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. U.S. elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a tool for facilitating aggression during WWII</td>
<td>U.S. strategic thinking during World War II</td>
<td>5.2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The United States should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, expansion, independence, bolstering, or compromise after acquiring nuclear weapons in 1945</td>
<td>U.S. behavior during World War II</td>
<td>5.2.3–5.2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to improve their position against their opponents in World War II, and should have actively planned to use them for this purpose within the conflict. This expectation leads to Hypothesis 2:

\[ H_{USA\ 2} : \text{U.S. elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a tool for facilitating aggression against Japan and Germany during World War II.} \]

Last, the theory anticipates that because of the war the United States was engaging in, and the political priority that the United States would accord to improving its position in the war and against its enemies, the other behaviors identified by the typology would be less politically appealing. As a result, the theory predicts that the United States would not seek to use its nuclear weapons to facilitate the remaining behaviors in the typology: steadfastness, expansion, independence, bolstering, or compromise. This leads to Hypothesis 3:

\[ H_{USA\ 3} : \text{The United States should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, expansion, independence, bolstering, or compromise after acquiring a deliverable nuclear device in 1945.} \]

Table 5.1 summarizes the hypotheses, and where I look in the historical record for evidence to confirm or reject the hypotheses. The following sections examine whether these predictions are borne out in the historical record.
5.2.2 Aggression

On one level, it seems obvious that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression during World War II: after all, the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue to represent the only instances of deliberate and direct use of nuclear weapons against an enemy. However, at the point of nuclear acquisition, the United States was already making maximal demands for an unconditional Japanese surrender, was engaged in a total and brutal war against Japanese forces in the Pacific, was tightening the blockade of the Japanese home islands, and was engaging in a systematic effort to destroy Japan's major (and minor) cities from the air. The extreme circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons make assessing this behavior somewhat tricky. After all, given the way in which the United States was waging the war in the Pacific in the summer of 1945, did nuclear weapons really make the United States more belligerent in pursuing the defeat and surrender of Japan?

Ultimately, however, I argue that the use of nuclear weapons does come under the category of aggression. This was not because the United States could not defeat Japan without nuclear weapons. As Schelling argues, “With a combination of bombing and blockade, eventually invasion, and if necessary the deliberate spread of disease, the United States could probably have exterminated the population of the Japanese islands without nuclear weapons...it would not have strained our Gross National Product to do it with ice picks.” However, as discussed in Chapter 2, aggression can include the escalation of a conflict through the use of new tactics, forces, military doctrines, or technologies. The use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki meets this definition because it crossed an important technological focal point from the perspective of the United States, meeting Richard Smoke's definition of escalation as “a step of any size that crosses a saliency.” The significance of nuclear weapons, as discussed in Chapter 2, is the step-change in the efficiency of destruction that they offer: “nuclear warheads are incomparably more devastating than anything packaged before.” While the political goals that the United States was pursuing—the complete defeat of Japan—did not change with

---

nuclear acquisition, nuclear weapons allowed the United States to introduce a significant new military technology that radically increased the efficiency with which the United States could engage in the destruction of Japanese targets. Crucially, nuclear weapons also offered a plausible path to Japanese surrender without first having to engage in a brutal effort to conquer Japanese territory. While the incendiary bombing of Japanese cities was nothing new, the explosive power of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still three to four times greater than that which could be delivered in a conventional strategic bombing raid, and, of course, such a conventional attack required hundreds of bombers instead of the single bomber required for each of the nuclear attacks.

Thus, while it is reasonable to question whether the Japanese recognized the nuclear attacks to be dramatically different in scope from the attacks they had already experienced during the Spring and Summer of 1945, it is clear that from the perspective of the United States, nuclear weapons offered a step change in destructive efficiency. From the U.S. perspective, Ward Wilson argues, “the atomic bomb was clearly different.” The United States had dedicated some $2 billion dollars and enormous human capital to developing nuclear weapons, and U.S. policymakers spoke about the weapon in terms that suggest they did not simply view nuclear weapons as a marginal improvement on existing capabilities. In briefing the newly inaugurated Harry Truman, for example, future Secretary of State James Byrnes spoke “in quiet


tones which did not disguise his feeling of awe, that the explosive emerging from American laboratories and plants might be powerful enough to destroy the world.' At a later briefing, Stimson spoke of "the most terrible weapon ever known in human history." Truman himself worried that "I am going to have to make a decision which no man in history has ever had to make," and formed the Interim Committee of high-level policymakers to consider the various questions raised by the capabilities that the United States was about to acquire. U.S. officials, therefore, recognized that nuclear weapons were special, that using them would represent an important escalation of the conflict, and that their use would represent a watershed that would have broader consequences for international politics.

It is true that unlike in the South African case, the United States used nuclear weapons directly, rather than using them to facilitate greater conventional aggression. But both behaviors represented—in different ways—escalation of the conflicts each state was undertaking, and both fall under the category of aggression. Hypothesis 1, that the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression during World War II, is thus confirmed.

Using nuclear weapons in this way was consistent with U.S. thinking in advance of acquiring nuclear weapons. The purpose of the Manhattan Project had always been to produce a usable weapon that could have an important impact on the outcome of the war. It is not surprising that American military elites found the idea of nuclear weapons attractive. The use of conventional strategic bombing—and of area bombing of cities and civilians, rather than targeting exclusively military targets—had grown in importance within the overall war strategy as the war had progressed. However, even early on in the war, strategic bombing was increasingly viewed as an important tactic. Prior to U.S. entry into the war, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had written to his Minister of Aircraft production that "when I look round to see how we can win the war I see that there is only one sure path...and that is absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland. We must be able to overwhelm them by this means, without which I do not see a way through."12

---
By 1943 the policy of using strategic bombing to engage in indiscriminate destruction was explicit: Bomber Command instructions for the attack on Hamburg (Operation Gomorrah) read "the total destruction of this city would achieve immeasurable results in reducing the industrial capacity of the enemy's war machine. This, together with the effect on Germany morale, which would be felt throughout the country, would play a very important role in shortening and in winning the war...this city should be subjected to sustained attack." The British were quicker to embrace indiscriminate attacks on civilians and cities than the Americans, who (at considerable cost) had persisted in targeting military and industrial targets in Germany through 1944. Nonetheless, the poor accuracy of bombing technologies and the dangers associated with attacking during daylight meant that strategic bombing was always likely to tend towards indiscriminate attacks on civilians and cities. By the time strategic bombing began in Japan, it was seen by U.S. policymakers as a vital part of the overall U.S. effort to force Japanese surrender.

The promise of nuclear weapons played into this broader enthusiasm for indiscriminate strategic bombing as a potentially important factor in guaranteeing an allied victory. Certainly, U.S. officials did not view nuclear weapons as a magic bullet, and did not stop preparing for a conventional military assault on Japan. Nonetheless, according to Richard Rhodes, for President Franklin Roosevelt and his head of military research and development Vannevar Bush, "the bomb offered offensive advantage first of all," and there was little question that the bomb would be used against America's enemies. In 1944, Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed that the bomb could "be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this

---

13. Quoted in ibid., 471, emphasis added.
17. On the impact that prior thinking about strategic bombing had on the way in which nuclear weapons were initially understood, see Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, ch. 1; Miscamble, The Most Controversial Decision, 12–15.
bombardment will be repeated until they surrender." 19 Given the brutality of the war, and the political importance of achieving a rapid U.S. victory, there was little doubt that the United States would choose to use nuclear weapons. As J. Samuel Walker argues, "in a brutal and barbaric war, the very existence of the bomb assured that it would used without much thought." 20 Secretary of War Henry Stimson stated that he never heard "it suggested by the President or any other responsible member of the government that atomic energy should not be used in the war," and "emphasized that it was the common objective throughout the war to be the first to develop an atomic weapon and to use it." 21 Senior U.S. policymakers, in Martin Sherwin's account, "asked whether it would be ready in time, not whether it should be used if it was." 22 Similarly, General Leslie Groves, who oversaw the Manhattan Project, and had initially been skeptical of the war-winning potential of nuclear weapons, nonetheless came to the view that "if we were successful in time, we would shorten the war and thus save tens of thousands of American casualties." 23 Stimson wrote in his diary that "my chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible cost." 24 Three days after the bombing of Hiroshima, Truman declared that the logic of nuclear use was straightforward: "Having found the bomb we used it." 25

Indeed, it was the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used, and the belief that using them might be decisive in the war effort, that led to the dedication of such immense resources to the Manhattan Project. 26 In Stimson's words, "The entire purpose was the production of a military weapon; on no other ground could the wartime expenditure of so much time and money have been justified." 27 The Manhattan Project was accorded the highest priority as a

result, and the rush to produce a working device was considerable. As Roosevelt stated: “I think the whole thing should be pushed not only in regard to development, but also with due regard to time. This is very much of the essence.” And James Conant, the Chairman of the National Defense Research Committee argued that: “if the possession of the new weapon in sufficient quantities would be a determining factor in the war,” then “three months’ delay might be fatal.” General Groves’ instruction from Stimson was to produce a bomb “at the earliest possible date so as to bring the war to a conclusion.” The United States, therefore, built nuclear weapons with the full intention of using them and cognizant of the fact that to do so would cross an important threshold in destructive efficiency.

Although for many of the scientists involved in the Manhattan Project, it was the possibility of Germany developing a nuclear bomb that spurred their efforts, for Vannevar Bush and President Roosevelt, these concerns were surprisingly muted. In March 1942, Bush wrote to Roosevelt that: “We may be engaged in a race towards realization...but, if so, I have no indication of the status of the enemy program, and have taken no definite steps toward finding out.” In Rhodes’ words, “the two leaders were alert to the German danger and surprisingly indifferent to assessing it.” In other words, Roosevelt and other U.S. policymakers wanted nuclear weapons regardless of whether others might also be pursuing them, and intended to use them to achieve their goal of ending the war through the unconditional surrender of the United States’ adversaries. The intended target of America’s nuclear weapons was both the Japanese and Germans. There were several reasons that the United States planned to target Japan with its first atomic attack, including the fact that German scientists would be better able to accurately analyze a “dud” explosion if it occurred and the initial absence of B-29 bombers in Europe. Nonetheless, Groves reported that “President Roosevelt asked if we were prepared to drop bombs on Germany if it was necessary to do so and we replied that we would be

29. Quoted in ibid., 407.
32. Ibid.
prepared to do so." When he came into the presidency, Truman "fell heir to the assumption that the bomb would be used." Just eight days after the successful test in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, Truman authorized the dropping of nuclear weapons on Japanese cities as soon as the weapons were ready. The purpose of doing so was clear: to escalate—and end—the war. As he wrote, the Japanese "will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland." Although Truman would later claim to have had no doubts about his decision to use nuclear weapons, there was at least some ambivalence about the course of action he had authorized. As he wrote in his diary, "It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful." In short, not only did the United States use nuclear weapons in the way the theory anticipates, but they had thought about using nuclear weapons in that way since the start of the Manhattan Project. Hypothesis 2 is therefore also confirmed.

Overall, the United States' use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki comes under the category of aggression. While the United States was already making maximal demands of Japan and engaged in a brutal war against its forces in the Pacific and its cities from the air, the use of nuclear weapons nonetheless represented (and was seen at the time to represent) and important escalatory step that could potentially prove decisive in ending the war. This way of using nuclear weapons was consistent with the way in which American elites had thought about the utility of nuclear weapons since the start of the Manhattan Project.

5.2.3 Compromise

Nuclear weapons may have allowed the United States to engage in compromise, defined as accepting less in ongoing disputes. Ultimately, the United States backed down somewhat from the demands articulated at the Potsdam conference for a completely unconditional Japanese surrender, and made modest concessions to the Japanese regarding the status of the emperor. 38

35. Ibid.
36. Quoted in Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 37.
38. For discussion of the evolution of the terms of Japanese surrender, see Miscamble, The Most Controversial Decision, ch. 6.
In some ways, nuclear weapons hardened the resolve of U.S. policymakers and made them less inclined to compromise. For example, at the meeting discussing the initial Japanese offer of surrender (on terms much more favorable to Japan than those the Japanese ultimately accepted), the Secretary of State asked why the United States should “go further [in offering concessions] than we were willing to go at Potsdam when we had no atomic bomb, and Russia was not in the war.” And as U.S. negotiations over the terms of Japanese surrender were ongoing, the U.S. military was preparing for a third atomic strike against Tokyo in late August on the assumption that further nuclear attacks would allow the United States to drive a harder bargain rather than facilitate U.S. compromises.

On the other hand, nuclear weapons offered the United States a tool with which they could potentially achieve Japanese surrender without fighting a bloody invasion of Japan, and do so without the assistance of the Soviet Union. This may have made the United States more willing to accept limited compromises on the status of the emperor in order to avoid U.S. casualties and wrap up the conflict sufficiently quickly to keep the Soviet Union out of the postwar occupation. Before nuclear acquisition, the United States had anticipated requiring Soviet assistance to invade and defeat Japan. It is hard to imagine that having fought a bloody and costly invasion of the Japanese mainland, that the United States would have accepted anything other than a completely unconditional surrender. Once they had acquired nuclear weapons, however, U.S. policymakers sought to try to end the war before the Soviet Union could invade Japan in order to reduce Soviet influence over the postwar settlement (as I discuss further below) and were therefore prepared to accept the modest compromises on the status of the emperor necessary to quickly secure Japanese agreement to the terms of surrender. In this limited but nonetheless important way, U.S. nuclear weapons facilitated U.S. compromise.

### 5.2.4 Independence

Similarly, there are also ways in which nuclear weapons facilitated U.S. independence—defined as taking actions that allies oppose or do not support. As discussed, prior to nuclear acquisition,
the United States had anticipated requiring (or at least desiring) the assistance of the Soviet Union to invade and defeat Japan, and at Yalta Roosevelt had obtained a Soviet pledge to enter the war against Japan once the war in Europe was terminated. The price of Soviet assistance, of course, was that the Soviet Union would receive a more favorable post-war settlement in the Pacific across a range of issues and territories. Roosevelt had agreed that if the Soviets would enter the war against Japan, the United States would allow them to annex southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles, establish a naval base at Port Arthur, and recover Russia’s pre-1904 rights in Manchuria, including its “pre-eminent interests” in the region's railroads and the port of Dairen.41 While many U.S. policymakers had misgivings about the Yalta agreement, they were disinclined to suggest abandoning the agreement while Soviet support might still be needed in Asia. As Melvyn Leffler argues, “until the new atomic weapon proved its utility, [Stimson and McCloy] believed it was unwise to forsake Soviet assistance that might still be needed to save American lives in the Pacific war.”42

U.S. nuclear weapons obviated this dependence on the Soviet Union by offering a path to Japanese surrender that would not require Soviet assistance. Truman believed that the Soviets “needed us more than we needed them,” that “our new weapons” meant that Soviet participation in the Pacific war was no longer needed to conquer Japan, and that the United States should no longer feel bound by the Yalta agreement. As Secretary of War Stimson argued, “they can’t get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique.”43 Instead, the United States used its nuclear weapons to end the war before the Soviet Union could invade Japan, enabling the United States to govern Japan alone in the aftermath of the war. Indeed, the Soviet Union had recognized in the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing that they would have to accelerate their intervention into the war in case the atomic bomb prompted an immediate surrender, launching an attack on Japanese forces in Manchuria.44 It is true that the Soviet Union had supported the U.S. use of nuclear weapons:

41. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 81.
43. Quoted in Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 33.
Stalin had told Truman at Potsdam that he hoped the United States would make “good use” of nuclear weapons against Japan. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was dissatisfied with the way in which the war in the Pacific ended, and the nature of the postwar settlement. Even after the United States had announced Japan’s surrender, the Soviet Union continued fighting Japanese forces in Sakhalin with the intention of occupying Hokkaido, before ultimately backing off after a “firm” response from President Truman on August 18. Overall, therefore, it seems fair to conclude that U.S. nuclear weapons reduced U.S. dependence on the Soviet Union in the Pacific, and thus that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence.

5.2.5 Expansion

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to engage in expansion during the war, defined in Section 2.2 as the widening of a state’s interests. U.S. interests in using nuclear weapons against Japan were the same as they had previously been during the war: to destroy Japanese cities, demoralize the Japanese population, and to achieve victory and Japanese surrender on favorable terms and with the loss of as few American lives as possible. Nuclear weapons were perceived to offer a higher likelihood of achieving these ends than continued conventional bombing, but the goals remained constant. It might be argued that the United States used its nuclear weapons against Japan to intimidate the Soviet Union and thus lay the groundwork for more expansive postwar ambitions. While most scholars agree that Truman did not choose to use U.S. nuclear weapons against Japan in order to intimidate the Soviet Union, “he was fully conscious of its diplomatic ramifications and eager to reap its anticipated benefits.” However, such effects were secondary to the primary intended outcome of forcing Japanese surrender. More importantly, such aims were prospective—they sought to influence how the postwar world would operate. As a result, such a claim would support the argument I make below that the United States used its nuclear weapons to engage in expansion in the

45. Miscamble, The Most Controversial Decision, 70.
47. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 34. See also Sherwin, A World Destroyed, 198–199. For the controversial view that the United States did use nuclear weapons primarily to intimidate the Soviet Union rather than to defeat Japan, see Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy.
aftermath of World War II.

5.2.6 Bolstering

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to bolster allies during the war—defined as taking actions to strengthen an existing alliance or alliance partner. While President Roosevelt had agreed with Churchill that the United States would consult with the British before using its nuclear weapons, this was not an effort to strengthen the British position but merely an acknowledgement of their shared investment in the Manhattan Project and the fact that both leaders agreed that nuclear weapons should be used (meaning that such an agreement would not in fact constrain the United States). The United States had no intention of providing Britain (and certainly not other allies) with nuclear weapons or otherwise using nuclear weapons to strengthen the British position during the war.

5.2.7 Steadfastness

Finally, there is little evidence that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness—defined as standing more firmly in defense of the status quo. Instead, U.S. officials viewed nuclear weapons as a weapon that offered primarily offensive opportunities, and intended to use them in this way during the war.48 Although the theory predicts an increase in steadfastness in addition to aggression for states facing serious territorial threats or involved in ongoing wars, it also recognizes, as discussed above, that given the circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons, the U.S. response to nuclear acquisition would be overwhelmingly characterized by aggression rather than steadfastness. As a result, the lack of evidence of the United States using nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness should not count against the theory. Simply put, because the United States was on the offensive in the war at the point at which it acquired nuclear weapons, it was not required to defend the status quo. Instead, at the point at which it acquired nuclear weapons, the United States was engaged in a more or less constant effort to revise the status quo and achieve victory in the war. The lack of challenges to the U.S. position makes assessing any change in the level of

steadfastness difficult, but it is clear that American officials saw nuclear weapons as offering primarily offensive rather than defensive advantages.

5.2.8 Alternative explanations

Overall, therefore, the theory of nuclear opportunism performs somewhat well in explaining how the United States thought about and used its nuclear weapons during World War II. The United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression against Japan but also used nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise and independence. Given that the theory predicts that the United States would use its nuclear weapons to engage in aggression and not use nuclear weapons to engage in the other behaviors, the theory makes correct predictions for four of the six behaviors. This section examines the performance of the three alternative explanations in explaining the U.S. response to nuclear acquisition during World War II.

The first alternative explanation is offered by S. Paul Kapur’s strategic pessimism. What does this explanation predict about American behavior during World War II, and are those predictions borne out in the historical record? As discussed in Section 2.5, two variables determine the predicted outcomes in Kapur’s theory. The first variable is whether the state is conventionally weak vis-à-vis its opponents. When it acquired nuclear weapons, the United States was extremely conventionally powerful, and there was little doubt that it would eventually emerge victorious in the war in the Pacific. Because the theory of strategic pessimism requires both conventional weakness and revisionist preferences in order to make a prediction of emboldenment in the form of conventional aggression, whether or not the United States had revisionist preferences does not affect the predictions made. Kapur’s theory therefore predicts that the United States would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, and that nuclear weapons would not significantly affect U.S. foreign policy. Kapur’s theory therefore makes a number of incorrect predictions, and is outperformed by the theory of nuclear opportunism.

The second alternative explanation is provided by defensive realism. This explanation predicts that nuclear weapons would make the United States more secure, and thus that the United States would have less need to engage in aggression, expansion, or bolstering—all
of which are behaviors driven by insecurity in the defensive realist world view. However, defensive realism predicts that states may use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. The United States did use nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise and independence, so defensive realism makes several correct predictions. But the United States also used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, which defensive realists would not expect. Nonetheless, overall, defensive realism performs reasonably well in explaining the ways in which the United States used and thought about nuclear weapons during World War II, though it still marginally outperformed by the theory of nuclear opportunism.

The third and final alternative explanation draws on the idea of the nuclear taboo becoming increasingly strong over time. This explanation predicts that states acquiring nuclear weapons late in the nuclear era would experience smaller foreign policy effects than those acquiring nuclear weapons early in the nuclear era, because of the declining credibility of the threat of nuclear use. The United States was the first state to acquire nuclear weapons, and normative constraints on the plausibility of nuclear use had not yet emerged. As a result, this explanation would expect that nuclear acquisition would indeed affect U.S. foreign policy. However, the nuclear taboo explanation does not make determinate predictions about exactly how nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy (though in the context of the brutal war the United States was fighting, it would not be surprising that the United States would be inclined to use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression). As a result, the explanation based on the nuclear taboo does not offer a compelling alternative to the theory of nuclear opportunism in this case.

Thus, although the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly in the U.S. case, none of the alternative explanations do better in explaining the ways in which U.S. foreign policy changed in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Both Kapur’s theory and the norms-based explanation are largely indeterminate in making predictions, while defensive realism makes fewer correct predictions than the theory of nuclear opportunism. Table 5.2 summarizes the predictions and performance of each explanation for U.S. behavior during World War II.
Table 5.2: Relative performance of the four explanations in the U.S. case, wartime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Nuclear Pragmatism</th>
<th>Defensive Realism</th>
<th>Strategic Pessimism</th>
<th>Nuclear Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>NO (✗)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YES = change in behavior predicted; NO = no change in behavior predicted; UNCLEAR = indeterminate prediction; ✓ = correct prediction; ✗ = incorrect prediction

5.3 U.S. conduct in the aftermath of World War II

Assessing the role that nuclear weapons played in U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II is a complicated task. The sheer breadth of U.S. foreign policy activity, the unstable and changing nature of international politics in this period, and the contradictory and complex ways in which the United States acted in the aftermath of World War II make isolating the effect of any explanatory variable challenging, let alone the acquisition of nuclear weapons—a technology that had only just been invented and the implications of which were not well understood by U.S. policymakers. In addition, the vast historiographical debate surrounding the origins of the Cold War and the many plausible historical interpretations of particular events in the early Cold War mean that any conclusions drawn from this case are necessarily tentative. Nonetheless, the theory of nuclear opportunism makes clear predictions about the behaviors that should be expected, and it is reasonable to assess whether they seem to be realized in the historical record.

The theory of nuclear opportunism predicts that the United States—a hegemon in the Western hemisphere and a state whose potential peer competitors were all either defeated and under occupation or ravaged by the effects of the most destructive war in human history—should have used nuclear weapons to bolster its junior allies and to expand its interests in international politics. I argue that there is good evidence that the United States did use nuclear weapons to bolster its allies and to expand its interests in international politics. However, the United States also used nuclear weapons to engage in foreign policy behaviors that can be reasonably characterized as aggression and steadfastness, against the expectations of the
5.3.1 Predictions

What effects does the theory of nuclear opportunism predict that nuclear weapons would have on U.S. foreign policies in the aftermath of World War II? This section measures the variables identified in Chapter 2, and uses them to make predictions for how nuclear weapons should have affected U.S. foreign policy during World War II.

With the end of World War II, the circumstances facing the United States had changed dramatically. The geopolitical situation facing the United States transformed from one in which the United States had to dedicate a significant amount of its national resources to an all-out battle with two great powers simultaneously. Instead, the United States faced a situation in which it was by far the most powerful state in the world and faced no serious threats. Because several of the variables identified as important by the theory of nuclear opportunism changed with the end of World War II, the theory predicts that nuclear weapons should have a different effect in the aftermath of World War II than they had during the war.

Measuring the first variable—the presence of serious territorial threats or an ongoing war—is uncontroversial. With the passing of World War II, the United States was no longer involved in a war, and the United States faced no serious threats to its territory. U.S. elites were certainly suspicious of the intentions of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union had been decimated by war, was thousands of miles away, and had no capacity to project power against the U.S. homeland. The United States thus emerged from World War II in an extraordinarily secure position—a hegemon in the Western hemisphere and a state whose potential peer competitors were either under occupation or ravaged by the effects of the most destructive war in human history. The United States thus faced no serious threats of the kind described by the first variable.

Because the United States did not face threats of this sort, the second and third variables come into play in determining how the United States would respond to nuclear acquisition. Measuring the second variable—whether or not the United States had a senior ally committed

theory.
to its protection—is also straightforward. Because the United States was now by some distance
the most powerful state in the world, it could not have a senior ally by definition.

The third variable is whether or not the United States was increasing in relative power.
Here, too, the coding is clear. In Paul Kennedy’s words, “Among the Great Powers, the United
States was the only country which became richer—in fact, much richer—rather than poorer
because of the war.” 49 Indeed, during the war, U.S. Gross National Product (GNP) rose by
around two-thirds. By the end of the war, the United States had a higher standard of living and
per capita productivity than any other country in the world, controlled nearly two thirds of the
world’s gold reserves, and possessed the world’s most potent military and power projection
capabilities. 50 American power eclipsed anything that its rivals had to offer. While all of the
United States’ peer competitors had been either defeated in war or devastated by its effects, the
United States emerged from World War II more powerful in both relative and absolute terms:
American GNP at the end of the war was three times that of the Soviet Union and five times
that of the United Kingdom; even British aggregate capabilities were close to those of the Soviet
Union, the United States’ only plausible adversary. 51 Militarily, too, the United States ended
World War II holding a historically unusual—if not unprecedented—concentration of military
power. In Melvyn Leffler’s words, the United States’ “strategic air force was unrivaled. Its navy
dominated the seas. Its aircraft carriers and marine divisions enabled it to project its power
across the oceans...The United States had preponderent power.” 52 The claim that the United
States was rising in relative power at the end of World War II is confirmed
by the Correlates of
War’s CINC scores, which provide a measure of a state’s share of global power. The United
States’ CINC score rose every year from 1937 until 1946. 53 Thus, as World War II came to an
end, there is little question that U.S. relative power was on an upward trajectory. Figure 5.2
shows the application of the theory to the United States in the aftermath of World War II.

As a result of this uniquely favorable geopolitical environment, the theory predicts that

49. Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000
50. Ibid., 461–462.
52. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 2.
53. I use version 4.0 of the National Material Capabilities Dataset, released in 2010. The original data is described
in Singer, “Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States.”
the United States' political priority should have been to expand its influence in international politics—forming new alliances, initiating new adversarial relationships, developing a greater ability to project power and influence, and so on—and that the United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate these behaviors. States that are rising in power and in a secure environment do not face tight resource constraints, and the favorable geopolitical environment in which they find themselves affords them the latitude to expand their influence in international politics. The theory therefore predicts that in the aftermath of World War II, the United States would use its nuclear weapons to engage in expansion and the bolstering of existing allies, and to stand more firmly in the face of any challenges, and that U.S. elites would view nuclear weapons as useful in facilitating these behaviors.
$H_{USA 4}$: The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion in the aftermath of World War II.

$H_{USA 5}$: The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering of existing allies in the aftermath of World War II.

$H_{USA 6}$: The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in response to challenges in the aftermath of World War II.

$H_{USA 7}$: U.S. elites should have believed that nuclear weapons were useful tools with which to facilitate bolstering, expansion and steadfastness.

Because of the favorable geopolitical circumstances that the United States faced, the theory anticipates that the United States would not seek to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, independence, or compromise. The theory anticipates that using nuclear weapons to engage in independence would be unnecessary because the United States possessed no allies with the ability to constrain its behavior. The uniquely favorable position in which it found itself meant that the United States was already able to set an independent course in foreign policy, regardless of nuclear weapons. Similarly, states that are both rising in power and facing few threats have less need to engage in aggression. As discussed in Chapter 2, rising states can afford to be patient in dealing with threats that they face, and the permissive security environment that they face affords them the latitude to do so. Using nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise is also unattractive because states in this position have the wind at their back: they have little reason and feel little pressure to engage in compromise. These expectations leads to Hypothesis 8:

$H_{USA 8}$: The United States should not have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, independence, or compromise in the aftermath of World War II.

Table 5.3 summarizes these hypotheses, and where I look in the historical record for evidence to confirm or reject the hypotheses. The following sections examine whether these predictions are borne out in the historical record.
Table 5.3: Summary of predictions in the U.S. case, postwar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Where to look for evidence?</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion after World War II</td>
<td>U.S. foreign policy after WWII</td>
<td>5.3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering after World War II</td>
<td>U.S. foreign policy after WWII</td>
<td>5.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness after World War II</td>
<td>U.S. foreign policy after WWII</td>
<td>5.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. U.S. elites believe nuclear weapons are useful in bolstering existing allies and expanding the U.S. position after World War II</td>
<td>U.S. strategic thinking in the aftermath of WWII</td>
<td>5.3.3 &amp; 5.3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The United States should not have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, independence, or compromise after World War II</td>
<td>U.S. foreign policy after WWII</td>
<td>5.3.3—5.3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.2 Bolstering

The United States certainly used nuclear weapons to engage in bolstering in the aftermath of World War II. Many of the security treaties that the United States signed and alliances that the United States entered into in the aftermath of World War II were entirely new (such as that with Japan) and can reasonably considered indicative of expansion (which I discuss further below). As discussed in Chapter 2, expansion includes the initiation of new alliance relationships. However, many of the alliances that the United States entered into represented the formalization of existing and longstanding alliance relationships (such as with the United Kingdom) and thus fall under the category of bolstering—defined in Section 2.2 as the strengthening or formalizing of existing allies or alliances. In this section, I show the important role that nuclear weapons played in supporting and sustaining these alliances.

Historians and political scientists continue to debate the United States’ ultimate goals in its postwar alliance commitments. On one view, the United States aimed to build up its allies in Europe (and elsewhere) so that they could ultimately take the lead in providing for their own defense. On this view, the United States sought to reduce its defense commitments over time.54

For example, Mark Sheetz argues that "postwar [American] leaders engaged in strenuous efforts to avoid a permanent military involvement in Europe." 55 Similarly, Brendan Rittenhouse Green writes that "the United States aimed to establish an independent European pole of power that could contain the Soviet Union with minimal U.S. aid." 56 On another view, however, U.S. alliances had a more hegemonic, suppressive character, and aimed to maintain the United States' position in Europe indefinitely. 57 For example, Christopher Layne argues that soon after World War II, the United States "intended to remain in Europe permanently, even if the threat of Soviet aggression disappeared." 58 Similarly, Francis Gavin notes that Washington's alliances in the nuclear era "appear to be permanent [and] to persist regardless of threat." 59

Regardless of the ultimate motivations underlying U.S. actions, however, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States entered into, and then formalized, a series of alliance commitments to prop up the economies and military capabilities of countries sympathetic to the United States. In 1949, the United States signed the North Atlantic Treaty with 11 countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). This was followed in 1951 by the ANZUS agreement with Australia and New Zealand and a bilateral security treaty between the United States and Japan; the expansion of NATO to Greece and Turkey in 1952; the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea in 1953; and the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan and the expansion of NATO to West Germany in 1955. Within ten years of the end of World War II, therefore, the United States had reinforced and expanded a globe-spanning alliance network, underpinned by American military power, and a U.S. willingness to play an active role in the defense of each of its alliance partners (and the deterrence of their enemies).

58. Layne, "The "Poster Child for Offensive Realism"," 152.
Secretary of State Acheson remarked that this amounted to "a complete revolution" in the foreign policy of a country that had traditionally eschewed potentially entangling alliances.  

This expanded alliance network was being built up, however, in the context of the massive demobilization of the U.S. armed forces that occurred in the aftermath of World War II. Despite concerns expressed by military leaders about the dangers associated with too quickly degrading U.S. military capabilities, President Truman and other elected officials ordered "the most rapid demobilization in the history of the world" in response to powerful domestic political demands to bring U.S. military forces home. U.S. carriers were converted into giant passenger ships to transport U.S. servicemen overseas back to the United States, and in January 1946 thousands of American soldiers "rioted and demonstrated in a desperate attempt to secure their speedy return to civilian life." U.S. military personnel fell from over 12 million in 1945 to around 1.5 million in 1947, and military expenditure fell by around a factor of 6 (after adjusting for inflation) over the same period. Even after this fall in capabilities, U.S. military personnel and expenditure were around 5 and 13 times higher respectively than they had been in 1937, but sustaining U.S. alliances with a vastly reduced military force nonetheless presented a critical challenge for American policymakers in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Even in West Germany, for example, the United States had only two divisions present, and those forces were dispersed throughout the country in order to administer the occupation. The conventional balance was so precarious that Secretary of State Marshall requested that the Secretary of Defense not make the details of the military balance public to avoid demoralizing the Europeans because "the picture which this presents is one of such hopelessness."  

Nuclear weapons provided the trump card that solved this quandary. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to maintain, strengthen, and extend U.S. alliance commitments while U.S. conventional military capabilities declined. The role of nuclear weapons was

60. "The Secretary of State to the Acting Secretary of State (September 15, 1950)," *FRUS 1950* vol. 3, document 573, 1229-1231.
63. Version 4.0 of the National Material Capabilities Dataset, released in 2010. The original data is described in Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States."
64. "Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the Secretary of Defense (March 23, 1948)," *FRUS 1948*, vol. 1, part 2, document 8, 541-542.
most explicit in Western Europe, although the same logic was implicit elsewhere as well. The crucial role that nuclear weapons played in facilitating America’s alliances in Europe had been recognized by U.S. policymakers even in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In 1946, George Kennan, the architect of containment, wrote that “it is important that this country be prepared to use them...for the mere fact of such preparedness may prove to be the only powerful deterrent to Russian aggressive action.”65 A 1948 National Security Council (NSC) report stated that “if Western Europe is to enjoy any feeling of security at the present time...it is in large degree because the atomic bomb, under American trusteeship, offers the present major counterbalance to the ever-present threat of the Soviet military power.”66

According to Secretary of Defense Forrestal, nuclear weapons were “the only balance we have against the overwhelming manpower of the Russians.”67 Indeed, such was the impact of nuclear weapons on U.S. strategy in Europe that George Kennan ultimately worried that the United States was placing too much reliance on them. As he wrote in 1949, “We are so behind the Russians in conventional armaments, and the attraction of the atomic bomb to strategic planners has been such that we are in danger of finding our whole policy tied to the atom bomb.”68 In 1950, NSC-68 made the reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional military shortcomings explicit, and embraced a policy of using nuclear weapons first in a conflict to make America’s alliance commitments credible: “In our present situation of relative unpreparedness in conventional weapons, such a declaration [of no first use] would be interpreted by the USSR as an admission of great weakness and by our allies as a clear indication that we intend to abandon them.”69

The United States may have overestimated the size and capabilities of the Russian army in the immediate postwar period.70 Nonetheless, U.S. perceptions of Russian capabilities drove

U.S. strategic thinking. Marc Trachtenberg summarizes the role nuclear weapons played in facilitating U.S. alliance commitments to Europe in the absence of large conventional forces: nuclear weapons meant that "the United States did not have to maintain a massive military establishment, or deploy forces in western Europe capable of defending that area on the ground. The West could settle for a tripwire strategy. Very powerful, and very expensive, forces in being—in particular, ground forces in Europe—were not absolutely essential." In Wilson Miscamble's words, by 1949 "American conventional forces were deemed capable of defending only the western hemisphere and the main Japanese Islands and perhaps of retaining communication lines to some bridgeheads in Great Britain, the Iberian Peninsula, and North Africa. The Americans depended on the deterrent quality of their atomic monopoly." In short, nuclear weapons were the only way that the United States could make credible commitments to Europe—and beyond—without the kind of conventional deployments that had become politically unacceptable in the aftermath of World War II.

U.S. plans were certainly not ideal from the European perspective: as a Newsweek article from 1948 claimed, "the temporary overrunning of Europe by the Red Army is taken for granted." U.S. war plans were essentially that "Europe would be overrun [in the event of a Soviet invasion]; but then the United States would gear up and begin a sustained campaign of atomic bombardment," and the United States hoped that this threat would be sufficient to deter a Soviet attack. Even U.S. war plans which dryly acknowledged that "atomic bombing will produce certain psychological and retaliatory reactions detrimental to the achievement of Allied war objectives" nonetheless concluded that "the advantages of its early use would be transcending," and recommended the "prompt and effective delivery of the maximum numbers of atomic bombs." Despite the grim nature of a potential European conflict that U.S.

---

73. Quoted in Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," 110.
plans implied, a reliance on nuclear weapons was the only politically feasible option for U.S. policymakers. As Secretary of State Marshall argued, “the country could not, and would not, support a budget based on preparation for war” and the United States was therefore unable “to build up U.S. ground forces for the express purpose of employing them in Western Europe.”

Relying on nuclear weapons to sustain U.S. alliance commitments, in short, was the only game in town in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Given the importance of nuclear weapons in sustaining U.S. alliance commitments, it is therefore unsurprising that even while the United States was undergoing a substantial demobilization, the United States nonetheless dedicated considerable resources to expanding its nuclear arsenal. The Joint Chiefs of Staff called in 1947 for an enlargement of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and substantial resources were dedicated to overcoming production problems and building up both the nuclear weapons stockpile, along with the B-50, B-36, and B-29 bombers necessary for their delivery. Similarly, it is unsurprising that the Berlin crisis of 1948 triggered both internal discussions about who controlled U.S. nuclear weapons during crises, as well as limited U.S. nuclear signaling in an effort to deter further Soviet actions. Three days after the Soviet Union shut off ground access into Berlin, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) was placed on alert, and by the middle of July the U.S. government announced the deployment of two B-29 squadrons (explicitly described as “atomic capable”) to the United Kingdom at the request of the British government. These bombers were not in fact equipped to deliver nuclear weapons, but those B-29s in the United States that had been modified to deliver nuclear weapons were placed on a 24-hour alert. The fact that the United States agreed to Britain’s request for nuclear signaling of this sort despite Truman’s concern that “this is no time to be juggling an atomic bomb around” is further evidence of the role that nuclear weapons played.

---

in bolstering U.S. allies in the immediate aftermath of World War II.  

Although the research design outlined in Section 2.4 emphasizes focusing on the role nuclear weapons played in U.S. alliances in the immediate aftermath of World War II, it is worth noting that the role played by nuclear weapons in bolstering and sustaining U.S. alliances continued throughout the Cold War, and was not limited to Europe. Indeed, once the Soviet Union and other countries acquired nuclear weapons, highly aggressive and counterforce-oriented U.S. nuclear postures became critical to maintaining a credible commitment to allies facing potentially significant conventional threats. In Europe the threat of nuclear escalation was a “key element in the NATO deterrent equation” throughout the Cold War.

Even beyond Europe, however, as Earl Ravenel argued during the 1980s, “America’s willingness to protect its allies rises or falls with the prospective viability of counterforce and, more generally, with the United States’ ability to protect its own society from nuclear attack.” The U.S. desire to use nuclear weapons to bolster allies thus provides at least part of the explanation for the fact that U.S. nuclear war plans became dominated by counterforce considerations by the early 1960s. The United States also deployed nuclear weapons on the territory of a host of allies, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Japan, Morocco, the Netherlands, the Philippines, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom and West Germany.

Presumably the United States undertook such deployments because it believed that doing so

---


85. Fuhrmann and Sechser, “Nuclear Strategy, Nonproliferation, and the Causes of Foreign Nuclear Deployments,” 466. Japan is not included in Fuhrmann and Sechser’s dataset because U.S. nuclear forces were deployed on Okinawa, over which the United States held sovereign control until 1972.
contributed to reassuring allies and deterring potential threats. The view that nuclear weapons play a critical role in sustaining America’s alliances continues to this day. Although the United States stations fewer nuclear forces on the territory of allies, the U.S. government continues to describe nuclear weapons as a “foundational capability” critical for reassuring America’s many allies around the world.86

Overall, therefore, from shortly after the end of World War II, the United States has used its nuclear weapons to bolster junior allies and underwrite their protection.

5.3.3 Expansion, aggression, and steadfastness

This section examines the ways in which the United States used its nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion, aggression and steadfastness. The extent to which the United States expanded its interests, engaged in aggression, or merely defended the status quo in the aftermath of World War II has been the subject of a vast historiographical debate. During the 1960s and 1970s, disputes between “orthodox” and “revisionist” historians generated considerable heat on the question of whether the United States or Soviet Union was the more belligerent and expansionist power and thus was primarily responsible for the onset of the Cold War.87 Over thirty years after John-Lewis Gaddis claimed to identify a “post-revisionist synthesis” which recognized that the United States was neither the ideal form of the “Leninist model of imperialism” nor “naive and innocent” in its conduct of the Cold War, historical debates over U.S. motivations and behavior in the immediate postwar continue.88

This historiographical debate combines with (and perhaps results from) the extraordinarily complex and contested postwar international environment to make analyzing the effect of nuclear weapons on postwar U.S. foreign policy extremely challenging. In particular, distinguishing between several of the behaviors identified in the typology is extremely difficult, and considerably harder than in previous cases. For example, identifying the status quo is critical

87. For an overview of the debate, see Jones and Woods, “Origins of the Cold War in Europe and the Near East.”
to distinguishing between aggression and steadfastness. But in the context of the immediate postwar period, where what constituted the status quo in the Soviet-U.S. relationship was open to significant disagreement, doing so conclusively is extremely challenging. Similarly, distinguishing between “pre-existing” and “new” interests—crucial to distinguishing between expansion and aggression—in the context of an international environment characterized by extraordinary upheaval is extremely tricky. I therefore discuss all three behaviors in this section. I examine three interconnected aspects of U.S. foreign policy—the United States’ installation of a world-wide peacetime network of overseas bases; U.S. interactions with the Soviet Union; and the use of economic power for political ends. Regardless of the label one assigns to each behavior, I argue that each behavior was facilitated in important ways by nuclear weapons. I therefore argue that the United States used nuclear weapons both to facilitate expansion (which is predicted by the theory) and aggression and steadfastness (which are not). Thus, although considering these behaviors together works against my theory (which only predicts that the United States would engage in expansion), it nonetheless demonstrates the complex ways in which the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate its foreign policy goals in the immediate postwar. In a broad sense, the case thus reinforces the broader argument of the dissertation about the political utility of nuclear weapons.

Overseas bases

U.S. policymakers had concluded during the war that U.S. dominance of the Western hemisphere was no longer sufficient to guarantee U.S. security, and that the United States required a permanent and extensive network of overseas bases for both offensive and defensive operations. The attack on Pearl Harbor, the rise of strategic bombing as a tactic of great power war, and the possibility of other states using nuclear weapons against the United States all pointed in the direction of a more forward defense and an extensive system of overseas bases. Such bases would allow the United States both a greater chance of interdicting attacks on the homeland, and a greater ability to project power against potential adversaries. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued, in the aftermath of World War II, “neither geography nor allies will render a nation immune from sudden and paralyzing attack should an aggressor arise to plague the peace of...
the world.” As Army Chief of Staff George Marshall stated, “It no longer appears practical to continue what we once conceived as hemispheric defense as a satisfactory basis for our security. We are now concerned with the peace of the entire world.” As the U.S. envoy to Moscow had informed Stalin in 1945, “the interests of the United States were world wide and not confined to North and South America and the Pacific Ocean.” In 1943, defense officials therefore started to examine the number of overseas bases that the United States would need in the aftermath of victory. In November 1945, months after the Japanese surrender, the Chiefs of Staff provided the Secretary of State with a list of 35 bases deemed “essential” or “required” that would require State Department negotiation to secure. As Leffler summarizes the outcome of the process: “After extensive discussion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) defined a set of primary, secondary, and minor base sites. The primary areas stretched to the western shores of the Pacific, encompassed the polar air routes, and projected U.S. power into the Eastern Atlantic as well as the Caribbean and the Panama Canal zone. Dozens of additional sites were denoted as secondary and minor base areas.” In short, U.S. “military planners [had] redefined the U.S. strategic perimeter.”

Putting in place a globe-spanning series of overseas bases could be plausibly interpreted either as aggression, expansion, or steadfastness. Certainly, these bases were part of a broader U.S. strategy to play a larger role in world affairs and increase the U.S. ability to project power. Compared to any previous period of peace, they arguably represented a significant expansion of U.S. interests. In Layne’s words, in planning for a peacetime network of overseas bases, “American policymakers were laying the grand strategic foundations of a postwar international system in which U.S. power would be predominant.” General Groves encouraged the United States to take advantage of its predominant power to expand its position: “We are now in a favorable position...we should get our bases now and plan not for 10 years but for 50-100 years

89. “The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of State (March 29, 1946),” FRUS 1946 vol. 1, document 590, 1165–1166.
90. Quoted in Layne, The Peace of Illusions, 41-42.
91. Quoted in ibid., 41.
92. “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of State (November 7, 1945),” FRUS 1946 vol. 1, document 580, 1112–1117.
93. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 56.
ahead."95 But an argument could also be made that such behaviors represented aggression: the United States was simply generating greater offensive capabilities to guarantee a long-standing interest—the ability to protect the U.S. homeland—from developing threats and the increasing power projection capabilities of adversaries. Certainly many U.S. documents framed the importance of overseas bases in such terms. For example, a 1946 report stated that "unless warfare itself is abolished or atomic warfare is effectively prohibited, it will be necessary for the United States to maintain...forward bases from which attacks against the United States could be intercepted and counter-attacks could be delivered against possible enemies." The report concluded that "our armed forces must seize upon these new developments and utilize them fully."96 Similarly, if one views these bases as allowing the U.S. to respond more quickly to acts of aggression by others, the creation of the U.S. base network could also be viewed as an instance of steadfastness.

Regardless of whether establishing a permanent, peacetime, network of overseas bases constituted an instance of aggression or expansion, nuclear weapons played an important role in facilitating this behavior. Of course, plans for overseas bases had been initiated before the United States acquired nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the relationship between nuclear weapons and a more extensive basing system was bidirectional and mutually reinforcing. In other words, an expanded basing system increased the potency and deliverability of U.S. nuclear capabilities, and U.S. nuclear capabilities increased the utility of an expanded basing system.97 As a 1945 report argued, the "advent of the atomic bomb...greatly increases the importance of [advance] bases. This is true both offensively and defensively. Offensively, it is essential to transport the bomb to the internal vital areas of the enemy nation. The closer our bases are to those areas, the more effectively can this be done...all of this points to the great importance of expanding our strategic frontiers in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and

97. On the ranges of different U.S. bombers, and the U.S. reliance on overseas bases to deliver nuclear weapons in the late 1940s, see Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, 61.
to the shores of the Arctic.” 98 Similarly, a 1947 report on the broader military implications of nuclear weapons recommended the “establishment of a system of strategically located overseas bases from which all our offensive weapons may be employed, thus enhancing our security by extending the range of those weapons.” 99 Nuclear weapons may not, therefore, have reduced the costs of an expanded system of overseas bases. But nuclear weapons increased the military value of such a system and thus made such a system more attractive to American military planners.

Not only did overseas bases and nuclear weapons each make the other more attractive from a military standpoint. They also combined to serve the broader political imperative of postwar conventional demobilization. The way in which nuclear weapons facilitated this goal was discussed above. But overseas bases were similarly critical to minimizing the military risks associated with a rapid demobilization, and the combination of the two was particularly valuable. As a Chiefs of Staff report had described, the challenge for the United States was to balance both the priority of “maintenance of the United States in the best possible relative position...ready when necessary to take military action abroad” while recognizing that “the United States, relative to other great powers, will maintain in peace time as armed forces only a minimum percentage of its war time potential.” To do this required that U.S. forces be “disposed strategically [so] that they can be brought to bear at the source of enemy military power, or in other critical areas in time” 100 This meant stationing U.S. forces closer to potential theaters of military operation. Overseas bases—and the increased potency that they offered when combined with nuclear weapons—thus allowed the United States to engage in the postwar demobilization while maintaining significant power projection capabilities.

100. “Memorandum Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (March 27, 1946),” FRUS 1946, vol. 1, part 1, document 589, 1160-1165.
Foreign policy toward the Soviet Union

Nuclear weapons also facilitated the way in which the United States conducted its foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. Again, the circumstances of the immediate postwar make it hard to empirically distinguish whether these behaviors should be characterized as aggression, expansion, or steadfastness. The status quo was ill-defined and and open to conflicting interpretations, and the extent of the United State's pre-existing interests was far from clear. As a result, different scholars have very different interpretations of certain U.S. actions.

To take one example, was the provision of aid to the governments of Turkey and Greece—subsequently articulated as the Truman Doctrine and a core part of the early postwar effort to contain Soviet influence—an example of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness? On one account, the move appears expansive: the Americans were shedding the last vestiges of isolationism and expanding their interests to gain increased influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East as British power waned. Stephen Xydis argues that the Truman Doctrine initiated "an authentically revolutionary phase in the nation's experience [that] ended the epoch of isolation."¹⁰¹ Leffler argues that "the real problem was that there loomed gaping vacuums of power...while British power foundered, the American desire for access to the airfields and petroleum resources of the Middle East mounted."¹⁰² On another view, the policy was an example of steadfastness. Gaddis argues that the provision of aid to the Turkish and Greek governments simply sought to defend the status quo. The Truman doctrine was simply "the ultimate expression of the "patience and firmness" strategy...that the United States could allow no further gains in territory or influence for the Soviet Union."¹⁰³ On another view, the policy was aggressive because it simply aimed to push harder in pursuit of a pre-existing interest: Howard Jones argues that the Truman Doctrine indicated "the administration's willingness to engage in the struggle against communism on all fronts—social, political, and economic as well as military."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰². Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 124.
I do not seek to resolve these debates by affixing particular labels to these behaviors. Instead, I describe the basic features of U.S. interactions with the Soviet Union in the immediate postwar, and the ways in which nuclear weapons influenced them. What were the key features of U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union? I discuss three aspects of U.S. foreign policy: the willingness to engage in vigorous and sometimes escalatory diplomacy in response to perceived Soviet aggression; offensive covert actions aimed at undermining the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself; and the prominence of thinking about preventive war in U.S. foreign policy discourse. I argue that nuclear weapons contributed to each of these three components of U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

First, the United States was prepared to engage in active and occasionally belligerent diplomacy in response to, and to deter, perceived Soviet aggression and misbehavior. In 1946, the United States had become increasingly angered by Soviet maintenance of troops in Iran in 1946. In Truman’s words, this represented an “outrage if I ever saw one,” and ultimately coerced the Soviet Union into withdrawing forces from the country.105 Also in 1946, Truman had declared himself willing to follow “to the end” advice that recommended using “the force of American arms” in the event of any Soviet aggression in Turkey.106 Scholars disagree over whether such Soviet intervention was in fact likely—Leffler argues that such fears were “contrived” to justify the American desire for access to the airfields and oil of the Middle East, while Mark argues that they were “sincere and justified within the context of the strategic premises that informed American foreign policy.”107 In 1947, Truman laid out the Truman doctrine providing support for the Greek and Turkish governments in response to Britain withdrawing its aid to the two states. And in 1948, in response to the Soviet blockade of West Berlin (which in turn was in response to the announcement of the Deutsche Mark) the western allies undertook the Berlin airlift to transport food and fuel to the city’s population, flying over 200,000 flights over the 11 months of the blockade. The Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded in October 1948 that to go to war over Berlin “would be neither militarily prudent nor strategically

sound,” and urged the civilian leadership to consider withdrawing from West Berlin.\textsuperscript{108} But despite the United States’ relative military weakness, and the vulnerability of Berlin to Soviet military action, the United States was nonetheless prepared to engage in calculated escalations which did risk that outcome.

The United States did not always choose to escalate conflicts in its dealings with the Soviet Union or in its implementation of containment. The President had proclaimed that it was “the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation” in his address announcing the Truman doctrine. But this policy was certainly not pursued universally.\textsuperscript{109} The United States did not seek to oppose the Communists in Czechoslovakia in 1947, decided to withdraw from Korea in the same year, and took a “middle road” in seeking to prevent communist takeovers of Italy and Greece.

Second, the United States undertook a certain amount of offensive actions aimed at undermining the Soviet Union within the eastern bloc and Soviet territory. Scholars are increasingly documenting the extents to which the United States went in a covert attempt to weaken the Soviet position and “eliminate the Soviet threat expeditiously.”\textsuperscript{110} Covert operations began with an effort to suppress the Communist vote and ensure a Christian Democrat victory in the Italian elections in 1947.\textsuperscript{111} The perceived success of this effort led to the approval by Truman in 1948 of NSC 20/4 which stated explicitly that America’s goals “in times of peace as well as in time of war” were to “reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat,” ambitions that would require the U.S. to “place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power.”\textsuperscript{112} This was accompanied by NSC 10/2 which con-

\textsuperscript{108}. Quoted in Trachtenberg, \textit{A Constructed Peace}, 81.
\textsuperscript{111}. Mitrovich, \textit{Undermining the Kremlin}, 17–18.
\textsuperscript{112}. “Report to the President by the National Security Council (November 23, 1948),” \textit{FRUS 1948} vol. 1, part 2, document 61, 662–669.
cluded that “the overt foreign activities of the U.S. government must be supplemented by covert operations” and demanded that operations be “planned and executed [so] that any U.S. Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility.”113 This directive provided the basis for a range of policies: broadcasting propaganda into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; the deployment of paramilitary forces to develop underground resistance movements; the attempt to disrupt Kremlin decisionmaking; the funnelling of support to East European liberation groups; sabotage and demolition; encouraging defections to the West; and attempting to provoke power struggles and personal animosity within the Communist leadership. The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), created by NSC 10/2 and attached to the CIA, was authorized to engage in covert operations, and by 1952 its budget had grown to $82 million, with over 2,800 employees and an additional 3,142 operatives under contract.114 Undermining the Soviet Union’s influence in Eastern Europe proved harder than U.S. policymakers hoped: the OPC’s James McCargar had anticipated that “we had only to shake the trees and the ripe plums would fall.”115 But offensive actions inside the Soviet sphere of influence were nonetheless a part of U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

Third, arguments for preventive war against the Soviet Union were surprisingly prevalent in the United States—both inside government and outside.116 As Bertrand Russell wrote, “If America were less imperialistic, there would be another possibility...it would be possible for Americans to use their position of temporary superiority to insist upon disarmament...everywhere except the United States...During the next few years this policy could be enforced.”117 These ideas were not only the domain of philosophers and public intellectuals. As Trachtenberg documents, leading journalists, U.S. Senators, and high-ranking military officers all made preventive war arguments. While such ideas were not implemented for a wide range of practical, strategic, and normative reasons, their existence is nonetheless notable.

114. Mitrovich, Undermining the Kremlin, 182.
117. Quester, Nuclear Monopoly, 38.
Regardless of whether one views these features of U.S. foreign policy towards the Soviet Union as instances of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness (or some combination of all three), what role did nuclear weapons play in facilitating them? In short, it is hard to overemphasize the importance of nuclear weapons. As a 1946 State Department report had stated, “It would be strange indeed if the perfection of such a revolutionary weapon did not have great political effects.”118 In a situation of considerable conventional weakness relative to the Soviet Union, U.S. nuclear weapons were the only capability that gave the United States some degree of escalation dominance, and thus facilitated the United States taking actions that ran some risk of leading to conflict. This importance was reflected in the considerable (and growing) importance accorded to atomic bombing in U.S. war plans for potential conflict with the Soviet Union. War plan BROILER in 1947 called for 34 bombs to be dropped on 24 cities; TROJAN, approved in 1948, requested 133 bombs be used on 70 cities; while OFFTACKLE in 1949 called for 220 bombs to be dropped on 104 cities.119 Trachtenberg summarizes the way in which nuclear weapons facilitated U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union:

“What in fact was the situation as it appeared to policymakers at the time? First, it was universally understood that if war broke out, Europe would be overrun; but then the United States would gear up and begin a sustained campaign of atomic bombardment. To be sure, the initial American atomic strike on Rusia would have only a limited effect on Soviet war-making capabilities...[But] Russian industry and war-making power would gradually be destroyed with bombs and bombers produced after the war had started. The United States was sure to win in the end. The Soviets would not start a war because they knew that an American victory would simply be a matter of time.”120

Nuclear weapons were not a blank check for the United States to do whatever it wanted: the United States had to behave carefully because “even with the nuclear monopoly, American

---

120. Trachtenberg, A Constructed Peace, 89.
power barely balanced Soviet power in central Europe."\textsuperscript{121} As discussed above, any war involving an extended period of U.S. atomic bombing of the Soviet Union (and, presumably, targets in Soviet-occupied Western Europe) would have been unimaginably destructive. Nonetheless, because the United States believed that its nuclear capabilities meant it would ultimately win such a war, the United States was nonetheless able to resist Soviet encroachments and escalate crises at considerably lower risk: ultimately, it was highly unlikely that the Soviet Union would risk the atomic bombardment that would come if a crisis escalated to war. Events that occurred reinforced this logic for U.S. policymakers, providing evidence of the bargaining advantages that nuclear weapons granted the United States. Truman argued after he left office that it was the implicit threat of nuclear use that coerced the Soviet Union into withdrawing its forces from Iran. And as discussed above, the United States deployed nuclear-capable bombers to the United Kingdom during the 1948 Berlin crisis. More broadly, however, U.S. officials were certainly “aware that considerable risk-taking inhered in [the] type of offensive diplomacy” that frequently characterized U.S. interactions with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{122} And U.S. officials believed that nuclear weapons allowed the United States to limit the risks of such behavior even though the conventional balance was unfavorable. Secretary of Defense Forrestal laid out the logic explicitly in 1947. He wrote in a letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee: “At the present time we are keeping our military expenditures below the levels which our military leaders must in good conscience estimate as the minimum which would in themselves ensure national security...In other words, we are taking a calculated risk.” He went on to argue that “certain military advantages...go far toward covering the risk,” which he listed as the “predominance of American sea power; our exclusive possession of the atomic bomb; [and] American productive capacity. As long as we can outproduce the world, can control the sea, and strike inland with the atomic bomb, we can assume certain risks otherwise unacceptable in an effort to restore world trade, to restore the balance of power—military power—and to eliminate some of the conditions which breed war. The years before any possible power can achieve the capability effectively to attack us with weapons of mass destruction are our years of...

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{122} Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 111–112.
opportunity."123 The result of the configuration of military power, Forrestal argued in 1948, was that “it is inconceivable that even the gang who run Russia would be willing to take on war.”124 In short, nuclear weapons allowed the United States to escalate disputes with the Soviet Union with relative confidence that such actions would not lead to war. And while the United States did not have the conventional capabilities to engage in a large-scale offensive against the Soviet Union, U.S. nuclear weapons meant that there was little to prevent the United States from engaging in the kind of low-cost covert actions described above in an effort to undermine and weaken the Soviet position.

Other U.S. policymakers were also clear that U.S. nuclear weapons granted the United States significant advantages in their dealings with the Soviet Union, even if they did not lay out the logic as fully as Forrestal. Secretary of War Stimson wrote in his diary in May 1945 about a conversation with McCloy in which he recalled: “We have talked too much and been too lavish with our beneficences to them [the Russians]. I told him this was a place where we really held all the cards. I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn’t be a fool about the way we play it. They can’t get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action which will be unique.”125 General Spatz stated: “Our monopoly of the bomb, even though it is transitory, may well prove to be a critical factor in our efforts to achieve first a stabilized condition and eventually a lasting peace” on American terms.126 Secretary of State Byrnes had argued that nuclear weapons “might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war,” and that U.S. nuclear weapons might make the Russians “more manageable” on the question of eastern Europe.127 Finally, and somewhat less seriously, even President Truman had fantasized about the possibility of using nuclear weapons to engage in preventive war against the Soviet Union, writing a note to himself in 1946 saying, “Get plenty of Atomic bombs on hand—drop one on Stalin, put the United Nations to work and eventually

---

123. Quoted in Millis, The Forrestal Diaries, 350–351.
124. Herken, The Winning Weapon, 247. Forrestal did qualify that apparently confident assertion with an acknowledgment that “one always has to remember that there seemed to be no reason in 1939 for Hitler to start war, and yet he did.”Millis, The Forrestal Diaries, 395.
set up a free world."\textsuperscript{128}

Overall, therefore, U.S. nuclear weapons underpinned U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union in important ways. Regardless of the particular label one attaches to particular aspects of U.S. foreign policy, the role played by nuclear weapons is significant.

**Economic diplomacy**

Economic diplomacy—the use of the United States' enormous economic power—was at the core of U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II, and the United States was not shy about using it. What Francis Gavin characterizes as the "openness mission" of U.S. foreign policy has been at the core of U.S. grand strategy in the immediate postwar.\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, some, such as Robert Pollard, have argued that "American leaders used foreign economic power as the chief instrument of U.S. security from 1945 until the outbreak of the conflict in Korea."\textsuperscript{130} Whether or not one goes as far as Pollard, there is little question that the Marshall Plan and Bretton Woods institutions were prominent parts of U.S. efforts to achieve political ends in the immediate aftermath of World War II.\textsuperscript{131} Again, in the highly fluid circumstances of the immediate postwar, one could make a reasonable case that these policies constituted examples of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness. For example, one could see U.S. foreign economic policy as "the first major attempt by the United States to restructure the world economy," or as a more status quo policy aiming simply to reduce the likelihood of another spiral into economic nationalism, protectionism, and war.\textsuperscript{132} Instead of trying to resolve such debates, I aim to simply show that nuclear weapons facilitated these policies. Consistent with the story told above, it was the United States' ability to use nuclear weapons as a substitute for conventional forces that freed up resources to rebuild western Europe economically while retaining the ability to deter Soviet military actions against western Europe.

The Great Depression and the origins of World War II had convinced U.S. policymakers

\textsuperscript{128} Trachtenberg, "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy," 5.
(rightly or wrongly) that economic nationalism and rivalry were profoundly destabilizing forces and causes of interstate conflict, and U.S. policymakers feared a potential postwar economic depression.133 During the war, U.S. officials were planning for agreements that would ensure a more economically liberal international order, which was not only to the strategic and economic advantage of the United States but without which, a 1944 State Department report argued, the postwar world would “witness a revival, in more intense form, of the international economic warfare which characterized the twenties and thirties.”134 U.S. worries were legitimate: Europe’s economies suffered serious balance-of-payment difficulties and production shortfalls, while the inflow of dollars resulting from increased private U.S. foreign investment into Europe in 1946 and 1947 was canceled out by similarly increasing European investments in the United States, culminating in a severe recession in the winter of 1946–47.135

The Bretton Woods agreements in 1944 which created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and the Marshall Plan, which aimed to rebuild western Europe were the prominent features of this policy in the immediate postwar period. The Marshall Plan, in particular, involved enormous expenditures: $130 billion in 2016 dollars.136 Even for an “economic giant,” as Truman described the United States, these costs were significant, and congressional approval from the Republican-controlled Congress was not automatic.137 As Acheson noted in 1947, more foreign aid requests were unlikely to be well received since it “was understood when the British loan was made last year that no further requests for direct loans to foreign governments would be asked of Congress.”138 Achieving Congressional support for the Marshall Plan ultimately required emphasizing the looming Soviet danger rather than the economic benefits the United States could expect to receive, and in 1949, in response to recession in the United States, spending on the Marshall Plan, military aid, and

---

135. Ibid., 276–277.
other international programs was cut significantly, alongside further cuts in the U.S. armed forces.\textsuperscript{139}

The considerable resources that the United States wished to dedicate to economic diplomacy therefore required choices to be made.\textsuperscript{140} That choice was essentially between rebuilding the U.S. military and rebuilding the economies of Western Europe. U.S. policymakers framed this choice explicitly. As Forrestal argued: by keeping defense expenditure low, "we are able to increase our expenditure on European recovery." This represented a "calculated risk in order to follow a course which offers a prospect of eventually achieving national security and also long-term world stability."\textsuperscript{141} As Trachtenberg argues, rebuilding Europe's economy took priority over redressing the conventional imbalance that the West faced. Ultimately, "the economic recovery of western Europe was a more pressing need. If the continent was not to be lost, this, and not the military area proper, was where limited resources had to be invested."\textsuperscript{142} Nuclear weapons, as described above, facilitated this choice between guns and butter in western Europe by making the consequences of choosing butter less militarily worrisome. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to retain the ability to deter the Soviet Union with only a "tripwire" of conventional forces. In short, "the Truman administration remained confident that American economic power, backed by the deterrent power of the atomic bomb as a weapon of last resort, could almost single-handedly prevent a return to the economic isolationism of the interwar years and stabilize vital regions and countries."\textsuperscript{143}

5.3.4 Independence and compromise

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to engage in independence—taking actions that allies oppose. As discussed above, the United States sought to use its nuclear weapons to strengthen its alliances, and draw new states into its own alliance portfolio. But the United States did not seek to use nuclear weapons to gain independence from allies. The United States did move swiftly to extract itself from the constraints of the Anglo-American wartime


\textsuperscript{141} Millis, \textit{The Forrestal Diaries}, 350.

\textsuperscript{142} Trachtenberg, \textit{A Constructed Peace}, 90.

agreements. But U.S. nuclear weapons played no role in the United States doing so. After all, the United States was by some distance the world's most powerful country, and the United Kingdom was dependent on U.S. economic support to recover in the aftermath of World War II. The United States was thus able to set an independent course in its foreign policy even in the absence of its nuclear weapons, including with respect to the United Kingdom. Indeed, if anything, nuclear weapons—and their prominence within American war plans—may have increased the reliance of the United States on certain allies because of the need for overseas bases to deliver them. For example, during the Korean war, for example, Acheson remarked that the United States had to pay attention to British concerns about the conduct of the war because the United States would require British bases if they wanted to use nuclear weapons: "we can bring U.S. [atomic] power into play only with the cooperation of the British." 144

Finally, the United States did not seem to use its nuclear weapons to engage in compromise—accepting less in ongoing disputes. Certainly, the United States was not equally belligerent in all cases, and could in many instances have taken more escalatory actions. But this was a reflection of American perceptions of the limits of its conventional power, rather than the result of its nuclear weapons. As Marshall argued, american military power had to be employed selectively: "it was necessary to conserve our limited strength and apply it only where it was likely to be most effective." 145 U.S. policymakers seem to have consistently believed that U.S. nuclear weapons granted the United States bargaining advantages that would allow it to achieve better outcomes in international politics, rather than guaranteeing the United States the security which would facilitate the United States accepting less. Indeed, it is notable how insecure U.S. policymakers felt in the aftermath of World War II: despite the enormously favorable geopolitical position that the United States held at the end of World War II, the United States—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of the conflict that had just concluded—remained deeply concerned about potential adversaries and the possibility of future wars. Indeed, the advent of the nuclear age exacerbated these concerns, since the United States now had to consider the possibility of other states acquiring nuclear weapons and potential future nuclear

145. Quoted in Trachtenberg, A Constructed Peace, 88–89.
attack. Nuclear weapons did not, therefore, make U.S. policymakers feel sufficiently secure that they felt inclined to use them to facilitate compromise.

Overall, despite the difficulty in distinguishing between the various foreign policy behaviors in the complex international environment that characterized the aftermath of World War II, the theory of nuclear opportunism sheds light on the behavior of the United States. The theory correctly anticipates that U.S. foreign policy would be profoundly affected by nuclear weapons, and that the United States would use nuclear weapons to engage in bolstering, as well as behaviors that can reasonably be characterized as expansion. Nonetheless, and against the expectations of the theory, the United States also used nuclear weapons to engage in behaviors reasonably characterized as aggression and steadfastness.

5.3.5 Alternative explanations

This section examines the performance of the three alternative explanations. As discussed above, the theory of nuclear opportunism performs well in explaining postwar U.S. behavior. Nuclear opportunism correctly anticipates that the United States would respond to nuclear acquisition by expanding its interests and bolstering its allies in the aftermath of World War II.

The first alternative explanation is offered by S. Paul Kapur's strategic pessimism. As discussed above, two variables determine the predicted outcomes in Kapur's theory: whether the state is conventionally weak vis-à-vis its opponents and whether it has revisionist preferences. Only states that are both revisionist and conventionally weak should be expected to use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression. Other states will not use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, and the argument implies that nuclear weapons will have a limited effect on the foreign policies of such states. The United States, as discussed above, was the only great power to emerge from World War II in a stronger position than it entered into the war; possessed the world's most powerful military and largest economy; and enjoyed insulation from all other great powers by large oceans. Kapur's theory therefore correctly anticipates that nuclear weapons would not strongly affect U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II. As seen, however, nuclear weapons affected U.S. postwar foreign policy very profoundly. Kapur's
theory, therefore, does not offer a compelling alternative to the theory of nuclear opportunism in explaining the case of the United States.

The second alternative explanation is provided by defensive realism. This explanation predicts that the United States would not use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression, expansion, or bolstering, but would use nuclear weapons to display greater steadfastness, independence, and compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Defensive realism incorrectly predicts that the United States would not use nuclear weapons to engage in expansion or bolstering, and also incorrectly predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons to engage in greater independence and compromise. Neither of these behaviors are observed in U.S. postwar behavior. Defensive realism, therefore, performs poorly in explaining postwar U.S. behavior.

Finally, the third alternative explanation draws on the idea of the nuclear taboo. As discussed above, this explanation would expect that nuclear weapons would indeed affect U.S. foreign policy, but does not make determinate predictions about exactly how nuclear weapons would affect U.S. foreign policy. As a result, the norms-based explanation does not offer a compelling alternative to the theory of nuclear opportunism in explaining U.S. behavior in the aftermath of World War II.

Thus, although the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly in the U.S. case, none of the alternative explanations do better in explaining the ways in which U.S. foreign policy changed in the aftermath of World War II. As before, Kapur’s theory and the norms-based explanation make largely indeterminate predictions, while Kapur’s theory and defensive realism make largely incorrect predictions. Table 5.4 summarizes the correct and incorrect predictions made by each explanation in the aftermath of the war.

5.4 Conclusion

The evidence shows that nuclear acquisition substantially affected U.S. foreign policy, but did so differently during World War II and in its aftermath. As a state in the midst of a brutal war, the United States first used nuclear weapons to escalate the conflict and win
Table 5.4: Relative performance of the four explanations in the U.S. case, postwar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Nuclear Pragmatism</th>
<th>Defensive Realism</th>
<th>Strategic Pessimism</th>
<th>Nuclear Taboo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>NO (X)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>YES (✓)</td>
<td>NO (✓)</td>
<td>UNCLEAR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YES = change in behavior predicted; NO = no change in behavior predicted; UNCLEAR = indeterminate prediction; ✓ = correct prediction; X = incorrect prediction

the war against the Japanese. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States faced no serious threats or challenges to its military preponderance, and used nuclear weapons to substitute for conventional forces in the aftermath of World War II, facilitating a mix of foreign policy behaviors including the bolstering of allies and elements of expansion, aggression, and steadfastness. These outcomes are broadly consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism, which also outperforms the three alternative explanations in explaining U.S. behavior both during World War II and in its aftermath.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

The theory of nuclear opportunism and the evidence offered in the preceding chapters permits us to draw conclusions about the ways in which nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. Nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them in heterogeneous ways that reflect the differing political priorities and goals of different states, and these in turn reflect the different strategic circumstances in which different states find themselves. Nonetheless, a range of questions remain unanswered. This chapter summarizes the findings of the dissertation, assesses the external validity of the conclusions drawn, and outlines implications for both our theoretical understanding of nuclear weapons and international politics and for policymakers.

6.1 Summary of the findings

The small number of cases of nuclear acquisition means that there will inevitably be uncertainty regarding the interpretation of individual cases and in the overall inferences we are able to draw about the way in which nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them. Nonetheless, the weight of the evidence supports the arguments advanced. The theory of nuclear opportunism performs reasonably well (though certainly not perfectly) in each case, and performs better in each case than the alternative explanations. More broadly, in each case, nuclear weapons appear to have had important effects on the state’s foreign policy.
In the case of the United Kingdom, from the immediate aftermath of World War II, British elites saw nuclear weapons as a solution to two fundamental political problems they faced: the problem of dependence on the United States, and the problem of maintaining Britain’s position in the world despite Britain facing long-run economic (and thus political) decline. Britain therefore found pursuing independence from the United States, bolstering its junior allies, and standing more firmly in the face of challenges to its position, to be attractive, and Britain used nuclear weapons to facilitate those behaviors. After acquiring a deliverable nuclear capability in 1955, Britain was able to bolster its allies in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, and responded to challenges to its position more steadfastly and independently of the preferences of the United States, despite simultaneously cutting back on its conventional forces over the same period. These outcomes are consistent with the predictions of nuclear opportunism for a state in Britain’s position: not facing severe territorial threats or involved in a war but constrained by a senior ally and declining in power.

The way in South African elites thought about and used their nuclear weapons was dramatically different to the way in which the British had done twenty years earlier. South African elites saw nuclear weapons as a partial solution to the constraints posed by fears of escalation in South Africa’s conduct of the Border War in Angola. South African elites were deeply fearful of escalation and the potential for further Soviet involvement in the conflict, and saw nuclear weapons as a tool which allowed them to reduce those risks. By reducing the downside risks of South African escalation, after acquiring nuclear weapons, South African tolerance for escalation in the Border War increased and South Africa became more willing to act aggressively in the conflict, taking actions that South African elites had previously avoided due to the risk of escalation that they posed. South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to engage in the other behaviors identified by the theory, an outcome largely consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism for a state facing serious threats and involved in an ongoing war.

The United States offers the most complex case, and the one in which the precise predictions of the theory of nuclear opportunism are hardest to validate. In part this is because the enormously complex and changing international environment in the aftermath of World War II
makes distinguishing between the different foreign policy behaviors in the typology is more challenging than in the other two cases. Even in this case, however, the theory of nuclear opportunism outperforms the alternative explanations. The evidence shows that nuclear acquisition substantially affected U.S. foreign policy, but did so differently during World War II and in its aftermath. As a state in the midst of a brutal war, the United States first used nuclear weapons to escalate the conflict and win the war against the Japanese. Within the typology advanced by this dissertation, this is best characterized as aggression, although there are also ways in which U.S. nuclear weapons facilitated compromise over the terms of Japanese surrender and independence from the Soviet Union in the final days of the war. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States did not face severe territorial threats and was rising in power. The United States placed nuclear weapons at the heart of its foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of World War II, using nuclear weapons to facilitate behaviors that combined expansion, aggression, and steadfastness, as well as bolstering its allies. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to engage in a rapid conventional demobilization while nonetheless maintaining a forward posture, seeking to bolster existing allies and take on new ones, resisting and deterring Soviet encroachments, and also going beyond a purely defensive model of containment in its dealings with the Soviet Union.

Overall, therefore, the theory receives significant validation: the theory both performs reasonably well in explaining these cases both in absolute terms, and relative to the alternative explanations. More broadly, the empirical evidence validates the broader view of nuclear weapons envisaged by the theory of nuclear opportunism. Political and military elites in each case have viewed nuclear weapons as tools that enable them to pursue and protect their political interests and ambitions. Nuclear weapons do not transform a state’s preferences or political priorities; instead, they are employed in the service of those political priorities. This has consequences for our understanding of the role that nuclear weapons play in international politics that I discuss further below.
6.2 External validity

How does the theory of nuclear opportunism perform outside the three cases examined here? A detailed examination of each case of nuclear acquisition is not feasible, and the lack of primary sources for many of the cases of nuclear acquisition means that drawing strong conclusions is difficult. Nonetheless, I offer an initial assessment of whether or not the theory offered here offers a plausible explanation for the way in which a number of other states have responded to nuclear acquisition, and then apply the theory to generate predictions for the way in which Iranian foreign policy would change if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons.

6.2.1 Other cases of nuclear acquisition

First, in a number of cases, the theory seems to offer a plausible explanation for the ways in which other states have changed their foreign policies after acquiring nuclear weapons.

In the case of Pakistan, the theory would predict that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness, because Pakistan faces a serious territorial threat from India, a state with considerably greater conventional military power (and latent power resulting from its much larger economy and population). Similarly, the theory would predict that pursuing independence from its allies such as China, or expanding its interests in South Asia or beyond, are impractical and unattractive goals for Pakistan even with nuclear weapons because of Pakistan’s overwhelming need to focus on the Indian threat, and its desperate need for assistance from any and all sources. According to the theory, Pakistan would have little choice but to use its nuclear weapons exclusively to improve its position vis-a-vis India, and would therefore use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness. And, indeed, Pakistan is generally regarded as the textbook case of a state using nuclear weapons in this way. Nuclear weapons have acted as a shield behind which Pakistan has been able to pursue its foreign policy goals more aggressively in Kashmir and against India more broadly, notably during the 1999 Kargil War and in the use of subconventional attacks against Indian cities. C. Christine Fair argues that nuclear weapons “increase the cost of Indian action” against
Pakistan, which facilitates “risk-seeking behavior...to change the status quo.”¹ For Vipin Narang, Pakistan’s nuclear weapons—and the aggressive nuclear posture it has adopted—“has enabled Pakistan to more aggressively pursue long-standing, limited revisionist objectives against India.”² For Paul Kapur, “nuclear weapons...encouraged aggressive Pakistani behavior.”³ There is now a broad consensus that Pakistan uses nuclear weapons in this way.⁴ Similarly, nuclear weapons have allowed Pakistan to exhibit greater steadfastness in responding to Indian threats. For example, Feroz Khan, a Brigadier General (retired) in the Pakistani Army and a former director in the Strategic Plans Division that formulated Pakistan’s nuclear policy and strategy, writes that Pakistani elites viewed the various India-Pakistan crises of the 1980s as “validat[ing] Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s decision to acquire a nuclear weapons capability...[a] nuclear capability ensures defense against physical external aggression and coercion from adversaries, and deters infringement of national sovereignty,” thus allowing Pakistan to stand more firmly in defense of the status quo.⁵ This increased steadfastness was demonstrated in a series of crisis throughout the 1980s in which Pakistan was able to deploy “subtle nuclear signaling” and use nuclear weapons to resist “the influence and coercive power of the predominant India.”⁶

Similarly, the theory would predict that France—a state not facing immediate territorial threats when it acquired nuclear weapons, but with a senior ally—would display independence from the United States upon nuclear acquisition.⁷ France acquired a deliverable capability in 1964 when it acquired the Mirage IV bombers, and appears to have used nuclear weapons to facilitate greater independence.⁸ Upon acquiring a deliverable capability in 1964, France became more comfortable acting independently of the United States. France criticized the Bretton Woods monetary system, pursuing détente with the Soviet Union, recognizing China

---

1. Fair, *Fighting to the End*, 203.
4. See, for example, Ashley J. Tellis, C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby, *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani lessons From the Kargil Crisis* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2002); Kapur, “India and Pakistan’s Unstable Peace”; Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent*; Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability”; Narang, “Posturing for Peace?”; Fair, *Fighting to the End*.
7. Vipin Narang quotes France as facing a proximate, offensive, conventionally superior threat. However, for my purposes, the Soviet Union was sufficiently far away that French aggression should not be theoretically expected to be attractive to the French.
and, most notably, by withdrawing from NATO’s command structure. By the 1970s, French officials were even prepared to make provocative statements about their ability to harm the United States with its nuclear weapons, with General Guy Méry, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, stating that the “damage that we could cause to either superpower would immediately place it in such a situation of imbalance regarding the other superpower that it is doubtful that either could afford to tolerate suffering that damage at any time.” French leaders clearly saw nuclear weapons as facilitating French independence: as Wilfred Kohl writes, “the nuclear force was intrinsically related to [De Gaulle’s] political goals of ensuring France’s independence and augmenting France’s freedom of action in world affairs.” De Gaulle stated explicitly to John Foster Dulles in 1958 that: “Only in this way [through the possession of French nuclear weapons] can our defence and foreign policy be independent, which is something we prize above everything else.” Even well before nuclear acquisition, fears of dependence on the United States had driven France’s quest for nuclear weapons. De Gaulle stated that “American nuclear power does not necessarily and immediately meet all the eventualities concerning France,” and that France therefore needed to “equip herself with an atomic force of her own.”

The role that the desire for independence played in driving French nuclear ambitions can also be seen in the French rejection of U.S. assistance that might have imposed conditions on the development of the program: in de Gaulle’s words, such assistance would be “incompatible with [French] sovereignty.”

In the case of India, the theory also seems to shed light on the ways in which nuclear weapons impact Indian foreign policy. India does not face serious territorial threats. Not only does India possess a large territory and considerable strategic depth, but its plausible opponents would face serious challenges if they attempted to attack India: Pakistan is conventionally much weaker than India, while China would have to cross the formidable geographic barrier.

---

10. Quoted in Yost, Strategic Stability in the Cold War, 30. I thank Francis Gavin for bringing this quote to my attention.
of the Himalayas. India does not have any senior ally providing for its security (India's loose relationship with the Soviet Union had been deteriorating since the early 1980s), but was rising in relative power at the point at which India acquired a deliverable capability in the late 1980s. The theory would therefore predict that nuclear weapons would be used to facilitate Indian expansion and bolstering of any existing allies. And, indeed, the desire to expand India's position and status in the world was an important driver of Indian nuclear acquisition. T.V. Paul and Baldev Raj Nayar argue that "a key underlying reason for the acquisition of nuclear capabilities that often goes understated is the enduring and deep-rooted aspiration of India for the role of a major power, and the related belief that the possession of an independent nuclear capability is an essential prerequisite for achieving that status." George Perkovich makes a similar argument, arguing that Indian leaders were not driven toward nuclear acquisition by narrow security threats. Instead, Indian leaders as early as Nehru recognized that a "nuclear weapon capability could enhance India's status and power in the Western-dominated world," and offered a "shortcut" to major power status. Relatedly, Jacques Hymans argues that Indian leaders have consistently possessed a "nationalist" National Identity Conception (NIC) and have thus held high conceptions of Indian status, and that these beliefs have shaped India's nuclear decisionmaking in profound ways (though not always necessarily pushing India toward nuclear acquisition).

It is certainly true that expansion in the Indian context has meant something very different to the globe-spanning alliances and power projection capabilities that the United States pursued. Nonetheless, consistent with the predictions, Indian foreign policy became more ambitious.

15. Ibid., 111–112.
20. Hymans argued that it was only in 1998, with the coming to power of a leader with an "oppositional nationalist" NIC, that India took the final decision to test a nuclear weapons. But he argues that the development of India's nuclear technologies over the preceding decades and resistance to the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime, can be explained by the "sportsmanlike nationalism" of previous Indian Prime Ministers. Hymans, The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation, ch. 7.
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

and outward looking as India emerged in the post-Cold War world. This expansion occurred despite the considerable political and economic turmoil which characterized India at the end of the Cold War; despite facing a more assertive (and newly-nuclear armed) Pakistan on its border; and despite the predictions of political commentators that the end of the Cold War would be particularly damaging for India's geopolitical position.21 This shift to a more expansive, ambitious foreign policy had a number of components. First, India initiated the “Look East” policy: a broad effort to “develop political contacts, increas[e] economic integration and forging security co-operation with countries of Southeast Asia” which “marked a shift in India’s perspective of the world.”22 Second, India built diplomatic and military relationships with new allies, including Israel, Turkey, and Iran.23 Third, India aggressively pursued economic liberalization and foreign investment: including devaluing the rupee, raising the ceiling on foreign ownership; removing import and export controls; reducing business tax rates, etc.24 Fourth, India increased its investment in defense. Defense expenditure had grown slowly during the 1980s: from 15.9% of government spending in 1980-1981 to 16.9% in 1987-1988, but jumped to 19% by 1990-1991 despite a severe balance of payment crisis.25 Fifth, Indian participation in international organizations became more vigorous: including making more prominent demands for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and playing a considerably larger role in international peacekeeping efforts. India had not participated in any UN peacekeeping missions since sending two infantry brigades to Congo in the 1960s, but during the 1990s, India sent forces to Cambodia (1992-1993), Mozambique (1992-1994), Somalia (1993-1994), Rwanda (1994-1996) and Angola (1989-1999) and Sierra Leone (1999-2001). Overall, it seems fair to say that India “regained some of its self-confidence in the 1990s” and increased its international position and status.26 Not all of these changes in foreign policy were directly

21. Robert Munro, for example, argued that “India's reach for great power status is in shambles. The keystone of Indian power and pretence in the 1980s, the Indo-Soviet link, is history.” Ross H. Munro, “The Loser: India in the Nineties,” The National Interest, no. 32 (1993): 62-63
driven by nuclear acquisition. Nonetheless, scholars agree that the desire for greater status and a more prominent position in international politics was a core driver of Indian pursuit of nuclear weapons and technologies. It therefore seems plausible that nuclear weapons have played a role in facilitating the more expansive and ambitious Indian foreign policies of the 1990s.

In other cases, the theory seems to perform less well. For example, it is unclear that Israel became more aggressive or steadfast in its dealings with its Arab neighbors after acquiring nuclear weapons on the eve of the 1967 war, as the theory of nuclear opportunism would anticipate.\(^{27}\) While there were certainly nuclear dimensions to both the 1967 and 1973 wars that Israel fought in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, it is unclear whether Israeli conduct or the outcome of either conflict would have been different had Israel not possessed nuclear weapons.\(^{28}\) The effects of nuclear weapons on Chinese foreign policy are also ambiguous.\(^{29}\) While the theory of nuclear opportunism would anticipate that China—a rising state not facing severe territorial threats—would use nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion. It does not appear that this occurred, or, indeed, that Chinese strategic thinkers have ever thought that nuclear weapons offered the ability to do much more than deter nuclear coercion by the superpowers.\(^{30}\)

In these cases, it may be that factors left out of the model for reasons of parsimony overwhelm the variables identified by the theory of nuclear opportunism. For example, in the Israeli case, the dual fears of provoking reactive proliferation in the Middle East and

---


\(^{29}\) Some scholars have argued that Chinese aggression in the Ussuri River clashes in 1969 were partly driven by China’s nuclear acquisition. See, for example, Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent*, 144-154. But the evidence for this proposition remains limited.
the desire not to provoke the ire of the United States by explicitly unveiling Israel’s nuclear capabilities may have led Israeli policymakers to eschew some of the political benefits that nuclear possession offered. Similarly, in the Chinese case, the distinctive ideational beliefs about the limited utility of nuclear weapons held by Mao and other Chinese leaders may have led both to China’s relatively small and vulnerable nuclear force, and to a reluctance to use nuclear weapons to achieve broader foreign policy goals. While these factors may not influence the effects of nuclear acquisition across a wide range of cases (and thus should be correctly left out of a theory that aspires to retain parsimony and generalizability), they may nonetheless play a powerful role in individual cases. These cases, therefore, may say more about the inherent difficulty of explaining a rare and complex phenomena using just three binary variables than they do about the underlying merits of the theory.

6.2.2 What does the theory say about Iran?

Overall, although there are cases that the theory of nuclear opportunism appears not to explain well, the theory performs well overall. It is thus reasonable to ask what the theory has to say about the potential consequences of Iranian nuclear acquisition. Using the theory in this way also demonstrates that predictions from the theory can be generated in advance of nuclear acquisition and shows that the theory has the potential to offer policy relevant insights into the potential behavior of future nuclear-armed states. Despite the recent nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, Iran remains the state in the international system most likely to acquire nuclear weapons, and the possibility and consequences of Iranian nuclear acquisition remains the subject of considerable attention by both scholars and policymakers. While such a prediction could prove to be wrong, the ability to make ex ante predictions that offer the possibility of falsification is a virtue of the theory. Thus, in addition to being relevant to ongoing policy debates, making such predictions also offers a test of the theory—if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons and engage in different behaviors to those predicted, that would provide an indication that the theory may be incorrect or require adjustment.

If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, what does the theory of nuclear opportunism offer about Iran?
anticipate that the effects of nuclear acquisition would be on Iranian foreign policy? The first variable is the existence of serious territorial threats or an ongoing war. Iran does not currently face such threats. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed Iran's primary threat—Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Of course, the large numbers of US forces on Iran's borders with Iraq and Afghanistan posed a significant territorial threat to Iran, but the subsequent drawdown of U.S. forces in both countries has reduced such dangers. Today, Iran faces weak and internally unstable neighbors that lack power projection capabilities and pose little territorial threat. In addition, despite a long history of intervention by outside powers that have substantially influenced the outlook of the Iranian regime and its military forces, Iran retains "extensive natural defenses" including mountain ranges that encircle much of the country and ensure that "Iran's periphery favors the defender and is ill-suited to maneuver warfare." Similarly, while either the United States or Israel could conduct damaging airstrikes against Iran, the possibility of either state invading and holding substantial portions of Iranian territory seems remote. Because Iran does not face such threats, the theory does not predict that Iran would find it attractive to use nuclear weapons as a shield behind which to facilitate aggression.

The second variable is whether Iran possesses a senior ally that partially provides for its security. Iran lacks such an ally. While Russia and China have offered Iran some diplomatic protection in the face of U.S. sanctions and threats, that diplomatic protection has not been absolute and neither country has the power projection capability to defend Iran militarily in a sustained way. It is unlikely that Iran views either country as a patron committed to its security. Nonetheless, to the extent that Iran does view Russia or China as providing for its

35. This prediction is in line with the expectations of Stephen Ward. See Ward, Immortal, 321. Of course, it is possible that Iran's threat environment could change in the future. To take one example, if the Islamic State were to acquire substantially more territory in Iraq and a greater ability to project power, or if the current Saudi Arabia-Iran proxy conflict escalated into a more conventional military rivalry, it is at least conceivable that Iran could face a severe territorial threat at some point in the future. For one example of what Iranian aggression might look like, see, for example, the potential Iranian operations discussed in Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson and Miranda Friebe, "A Crude Threat: The Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign against Saudi Arabian Oil," International Security 36, no. 1 (2011): 167–201.
military security, the theory would anticipate that independence from those patrons would be incentivized by nuclear acquisition.

The final variable is whether Iran is currently rising in power relative to its primary rivals in the region. Although power trends in the Middle East are notoriously fickle, it seems hard to argue that Iran is significantly rising in power at the present point in time. While the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan have removed a source of threat on Iran’s borders and increased Iran’s relative position in the region, Iran has also suffered unwelcome changes in the balance of power over the last few years (notably, the civil war threatening ally Bashar Al-Asad in Syria, the ongoing effect of multilateral sanctions on the Iranian economy, and the recent rise of the Islamic State). Iran’s economy remains hamstrung by sanctions, high inflation, and unemployment, and is likely to remain poorly performing even in the event that some portion of the multilateral sanctions currently in place are lifted. Iran’s military forces are increasingly outdated, poorly maintained, and underfunded, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future: Iran’s defense budget is small compared to its rivals, with Iranian defense expenditure only amounting to a quarter of Saudi Arabia’s.

The anticipated theoretical pathway for Iran is illustrated in Figure 6.1. The theory anticipates that if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons that it would use nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of its allies and steadfastness in the face of threats in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. The theory does not predict the precise form such bolstering would take, but it would be reasonable to assume that it might involve increased resource transfers to existing allies such as Syria and Iraq, greater Iranian efforts to penetrate their domestic politics, and, perhaps, an implicit Iranian offer of extended deterrence to those states. In addition, Iranian bolstering need not only seek to boost other states. Given Iran’s history of using proxies throughout the Middle East, such behavior might also be observed in its relations with proxies than with other states. Iran could seek to provide additional resources to Hizbullah, increase

its influence over Hamas, or provide additional support to the Houthis in Yemen, as well as seeking greater influence over the governments in Baghdad, Damascus, and Sana’a. This prediction aligns with the expectations of Borghard and Rapp-Hooper, who predict that a “nuclear armed Iran may increase its support of proxies.”

Figure 6.1: Theoretical pathway for Iran

1. State faces serious territorial threat/ongoing war?
   - Yes: Aggression & Steadfastness towards threat
   - No

2. State has senior ally?
   - Yes: Independence from senior ally
   - No

3. State is rising in power?
   - Yes: Expansion, Steadfastness, & bolstering of junior allies
   - No: Bolstering of junior allies & steadfastness towards rivals

The theory thus offers mixed news to those concerned about potential Iranian nuclear acquisition. While the theory suggests that Iran using nuclear weapons to facilitate territorial aggression against its neighbors such as Saudi Arabia or Iraq in the way that Pakistan has is unlikely, the prospect of greater Iranian bolstering of existing allies is not an outcome that most American policymakers would find reassuring. Even greater Iranian steadfastness, while it does not actively threaten U.S. interests, would nonetheless reduce U.S. freedom of action in the region. The theory thus offers something of a middle ground between pessimists and optimists when it comes to Iranian nuclear acquisition.


40. For an optimistic perspective, see Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb.” For a pessimistic perspective, see Kroenig, *A Time To Attack.*
6.3 Avenues for future research

The dissertation also opens a number of avenues for future research.

First, the research design that this study employed only aims to ascertain how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them at the point of acquisition. This was justified given the lack of existing work on the question of how nuclear weapons affect state foreign policy, the internal validity advantages of focusing on the point of nuclear acquisition, and the fact that policymakers care particularly about the immediate effects of nuclear acquisition. Nonetheless, it represents an important limitation and an opportunity for future research. Understanding how the effects of nuclear weapons change over time—perhaps as states learn more about their nuclear capabilities and what they can do with them, or as other states respond strategically to the actions of the acquiring state—has the potential to add significant nuance and insight into the way in which nuclear weapons affect international politics.

Second, there may be opportunities to generalize the argument made here. Do other military capabilities facilitate the same range of foreign policy behaviors as nuclear weapons? If not, what are the characteristics of military technologies that lead them facilitate particular behaviors? Similarly, does the theory shed light on the way in which states respond to other endogenous increases (i.e., increases that the state chooses to invest in) in their power and military capabilities? Both the typology and theory may have broader applicability, and the extent to which the theory travels to other circumstances may have important insights for exactly what is special about nuclear weapons.

Third, the argument made here is in many ways a simple one: states are viewed as unitary, strategic actors; the theoretical argument is based simply on the military capabilities that nuclear weapons offer; and only three binary variables (of which none are unit-level variables) are used to explain variation in outcomes. This is obviously a simplification of a much more complex reality. There may be ways to add additional explanatory power to the theory by adding additional complexity that future research could explore. For example, there may be ways to incorporate the role of individual leaders’ ideas about nuclear weapons, a factor
that—as discussed above—clearly appears to be important in the Chinese case. Similarly, norms about the acceptability of nuclear use have changed dramatically over the nuclear era, and have likely influenced the effects that nuclear weapons have had in different eras. Last, different domestic political arrangements may influence the effects that nuclear weapons have: there may be systematically different outcomes in cases where the military controls the state’s nuclear weapons when compared to cases in which civilians retain control. In short, the theory described here provides a baseline that future research can add qualifications and nuance to in order to enhance its ability to explain the full range of variation we observe.

6.4 Implications for scholars and practitioners

Finally, the dissertation offers a number of implications for scholars of international politics and the nuclear revolution.

First, the dissertation emphasizes that states use nuclear weapons in service of their political goals, and that nuclear weapons are often useful in pursuit of those goals. Nuclear weapons do not, the evidence suggests, transform state preferences or suddenly make states feel secure. Instead, statesmen appear to view nuclear weapons in a more political, pragmatic, and opportunistic manner: nuclear weapons can facilitate a range of foreign policy behaviors and states seek to take advantage of the lower cost of engaging in these behaviors once they acquire nuclear weapons. This argument thus challenges much existing literature on the nuclear revolution. The standard view of the nuclear revolution is that nuclear weapons are inherently defensive weapons and that this characteristic dominates the effects that they have. Nuclear weapons guarantee a state’s security and this fundamentally alters the nature of international politics and great power competition. Robert Jervis, for example, writes that: “If nuclear weapons have had the influence that the nuclear-revolution theory indicates they should have,

then there will be peace between the superpowers, crises will be rare, neither side will be eager to press bargaining advantages to the limit, the status quo will be relatively easy to maintain.\textsuperscript{43} The evidence presented here suggests a different view: nuclear weapons do not transform international politics and state preferences to the degree suggested by advocates of the nuclear revolution. Instead, nuclear weapons are incorporated into the practice of international politics, and are used by states to pursue the political goals and aspirations that they found attractive prior to nuclear acquisition. Politics remains king, even in a nuclear-armed world.

The argument made in this dissertation therefore offers a way for scholars to make sense of the heterogeneity in the way in which states have responded to nuclear acquisition. This heterogeneity has largely been missed or assumed away by existing work, which tends to argue that nuclear weapons have a consistent effect across all states because of the technological characteristics of the weapons. However, because states occupy profoundly different positions in international politics and have profoundly different political priorities, the ways in which nuclear acquisition affects the foreign policies of acquiring states varies tremendously. The typology and theory offered here allows scholars to identify and understand the different effects that nuclear weapons have, and thus to make sense of the variety and nuance that we see in the historical record.

Second, the dissertation should lead scholars to expand our assessment of the range of states that may find nuclear weapons attractive. For example, since the end of the Cold War it has become increasingly common for scholars to think of nuclear weapons as “weapons of the weak” or “the great equalizer,” implying that nuclear weapons are only useful for conventionally weak states seeking to deter the United States.\textsuperscript{44} It is certainly true that conventionally weak states gain from the acquisition of nuclear weapons because of their limited conventional capabilities. Nonetheless, powerful states have regularly sought and benefited from the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The typology and theory offered in this dissertation sheds light on why this

\textsuperscript{43} Jervis, The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution, 45.

would be. Nuclear weapons can facilitate foreign policy behaviors that conventionally powerful states are likely to find extremely attractive, such as expansion or the bolstering of allies. It should not, therefore, be surprising that states have sometimes seen nuclear weapons as “status symbols,” nor that powerful states have often sought to acquire them, and nor should it be surprising that conventionally powerful and nuclear-armed states today show little interest in relinquishing their nuclear arsenals. Nuclear weapons are not simply a relic of the Cold War, and many states today continue to find nuclear weapons useful for pursuing their goals in international politics.

Third, the dissertation offers a theoretical foundation for recent scholarship that emphasizes the role of the United States in preventing proliferation to both allies and adversaries. The argument here provides additional theoretical justification for why the United States would place significant priority on the goal of nonproliferation. Proliferation—whether to adversaries or to states with whom the United States has alliances—harms the interests of the United States. Adversaries of the United States can use nuclear weapons in a variety of ways that would harm the interests of the United States: to facilitate aggression against the United States or its allies, to better resist challenges from the United States, or to bolster their own allies. But even allies of the United States can use nuclear weapons in a range of ways that are inimical to U.S. interests: allies can use nuclear weapons to become more independent from the United States and thus harder for the U.S. to control, or can engage in aggression or other behaviors that may draw the United States into conflicts it would rather avoid. The argument here, therefore, provides a theoretical justification for the United States’ consistency in pursuing nonproliferation.

Fourth, the analysis demonstrates the importance of looking beyond the possession of nuclear weapons in understanding their political effects. Instead, it is the state’s nuclear posture that determines the technological threshold at which nuclear weapons begin to affect state

calculations about foreign policy. For example, although Britain first tested a nuclear weapon in 1952, it was only with the acquisition of a deliverable capability in 1955 that nuclear weapons began to influence British foreign policy. Despite this, political scientists tend to emphasize a country's first nuclear test as indicating the point at which the effects of nuclear weapons should be observed. This approach may generate misleading inferences, because nuclear weapons may not influence foreign policy immediately upon testing a device.

The argument also has implications for policymakers thinking about nuclear proliferation and disarmament.

First, substantial traction on the effects of nuclear weapons can be gained by using a more discriminating conceptual language. “Emboldenment” is a convenient catch-all term, but it conflates conceptually distinct behaviors, and misses other effects that nuclear weapons may have. Policymakers throughout the nuclear age have often expressed broad and generic concerns about the emboldening effects of nuclear weapons, but have often failed to think in detail about the precise behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate. These distinctions are important because not all emboldening effects are equally concerning to policymakers. Both expansion and steadfastness might be considered emboldening effects, but, for example, a nuclear Iran that displays greater steadfastness is likely less concerning than an Iran that pursues aggression. The typology offered here provides policymakers with a conceptual language with which to more precisely specify the concerns associated with particular potential proliferants.

Second, the theory offers policymakers a tool with which to make an initial assessment of the relative likelihood of different outcomes that might occur if particular states acquire nuclear weapons. The theory, for example, suggests that Iranian nuclear acquisition is more likely to lead to certain behaviors (such as bolstering of allies) than others (such as aggression). This is not to suggest that policymakers should not prepare for the possibility of Iranian aggression.


47. E.g., Mueller, Atomic Obsession, 95–99.
in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition—policymakers correctly prepare for a wide range of unlikely contingencies. Nonetheless, the theory has the potential to guide policymakers as they assess which outcomes are more likely, and help policymakers as they decide how to dedicate finite military and political resources to different contingencies. In this way, the theory can potentially help to refine, adjust, or provide a more solid intellectual foundation for policymakers’ prior beliefs about the likelihood of different outcomes in a given case of proliferation.

Finally, the argument suggests that making substantial progress toward nuclear disarmament is likely to be difficult, and sheds light on the limited progress that the nuclear-armed states have made toward that goal. If nuclear weapons were merely vestiges of the Cold War, or if states simply wanted to possess nuclear weapons out of a misplaced belief that nuclear weapons confer great power status, nuclear abolition would seem an achievable task: statesmen would simply need to be educated about the disutility of nuclear weapons. This dissertation suggests, by contrast, that states that acquire nuclear weapons view them as useful for achieving foreign policy goals that they deem important and do in fact use nuclear weapons to facilitate a wide range of foreign policy behaviors. If so, nuclear-armed states will generally be less inclined to relinquish an important source of political power. Just as states do not give up other tools with which they can achieve their foreign policy goals—their militaries, intelligence services, diplomatic corps, and so on—nuclear-armed states will also be generally disinclined to give up their nuclear weapons. The argument of this dissertation is that nuclear weapons do indeed facilitate a range of foreign policy behaviors that a range of states find attractive, and do indeed help states achieve foreign policy goals that they value. If so, nuclear weapons are likely to be here to stay. Managing the risks that they pose will continue to be one of the central challenges that statesmen face for some time to come.
Bibliography


BIBLIOGRAPHY


