CONVENTIONAL PRIMACY & UNCONVENTIONAL CONSEQUENCES:
U.S. POWER AND THE NUCLEAR CHOICES OF ALLIES AND ADVERSARIES

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Introduction

The disparity of military power among states is greater today than ever before. The capabilities of the United States exceed those of any other state at any other time. Unrivaled power affords obvious advantages; the consequences are not always as apparent. This paper will explore the interaction of preponderant American force and the spread of nuclear weapons among U.S. allies and adversaries.

The global influence and vast resources of the world’s only superpower seem to have fallen short of realizing central U.S. nonproliferation objectives. Difficulty in attaining desired results in North Korea and Iran suggests the influence of contradictory nonproliferation policies and/or unanticipated consequences of intervening system-level factors. This divergence of superpower intentions and structural outcomes will be considered through deductive analysis of systemic factors such as polarity and the international distribution of conventional and nuclear forces.

American Military Power

Criteria for measuring military capabilities range from troop numbers and defense expenditures to sophisticated indices of non-material variables. Military power is “a product of how states use their material resources,” according to Stephen Biddle, “and this varies widely in ways that are not merely epiphenomenal reflections of materiel constraints.” Although economic metrics cannot fully account for capabilities, the scope of American military spending—five times more than all of its enemies combined or roughly equal to the sum of every other defense budget on earth—indicates the vast disparity between the U.S. and the rest of the world.

Conventional Superiority

American conventional superiority “effectively eliminates conventional warfare as a means of settling disputes with the United States.” This broadens the United States’ freedom of action, already unrestricted by the threat of superpower conflict. Because conventionally

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challenging the U.S. would be a losing proposition for most states, asymmetric or unconventional responses are the only viable option for those facing American forces. The National Defense Panel warned that nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons could “allow conventionally weak states and nonstate actors to counter and possibly thwart our overwhelming conventional superiority.”

Secretary of Defense William Cohen observed that:

U.S. conventional military superiority paradoxically creates an incentive for adversary states to acquire NBC weapons. Because our potential adversaries know that they cannot win a conventional war against us, they are more likely to try asymmetric methods such as employing biological or chemical weapons or threatening the use of nuclear weapons.

Future adversaries—having witnessed the first Gulf War—are likely to use unconventional weapons rather than accept “American conflict on American terms.”

Nuclear Superiority

During the Cold War the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship was often cast in terms of nuclear superiority, parity or inferiority. Different calculations were used to assess the U.S.-Soviet nuclear balance: number of warheads, throw-weight of delivery vehicles, estimates of lethality, equivalent megatonnage, economic recovery time, and more complex assessments of equivalent-weapons or relative-force-size index. Quantitative metrics can express relative nuclear “superiority” without suggesting what can actually be done with it—resulting in Henry Kissinger’s famous question, “What in the name of God is strategic superiority? What is the significance of it, politically, militarily, operationally, at these levels of numbers? What do you do with it?”

Numbers simplify comparison but static ratios can also obscure dynamic military consequences, such as the fact that “Dropping nuclear weapons on a country is an act subject to diminishing returns.” Because second-strike capability yields greater marginal returns than gaining a possible disarming-first-strike advantage, “the

10 Quoted in Barry Blechman & Robert Powell, “What in the Name of God is Strategic Superiority?” PSQ 97:4 (1982), 589; Five years later he defined strategic superiority as “the ability by the United States to pose a risk, or at least a perceived risk, to the Soviet Union that it might lose most of its strategic retaliatory force if it pushed a crisis beyond a certain point.” Henry Kissinger, “Kissinger’s Critique” The Economist (3 February 1979).
marginal utility of nuclear weapons is high for low numbers and low for high numbers.”

Some consider the pre-1957 U.S. strategic position—before long-range Soviet bombers or ICBM capability—as one of nuclear superiority. Richard Betts argues that U.S. leaders were never confident that nuclear war against a Soviet attack in Europe could be won at an “acceptable” level of damage to the West. In October 1962 the U.S. outnumbered the Soviets 17 to 1—or 5,000 to 300—in terms of nuclear warheads. Even though both sides were aware of the overwhelming U.S. advantage, American superiority had a smaller impact on the crisis than the actual threat of nuclear war. McGeorge Bundy recalls:

We had to assume that in any nuclear exchange, no matter who started it, some of these missiles and bombers would get through with megaton bombs. Even one would be a disaster. We had no interest in any nuclear exchange other than to avoid it. The fact that our own strategic forces were very much larger gave us no comfort.  

President Kennedy, referring to the strategic balance, remarked to advisors, “What difference does it make? They’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway.”

Shortly after nuclear weapons came into existence, Bernard Brodie understood that a numerically superior force did not guarantee strategic superiority. The severity of nuclear consequences meant that “the potential deterrence value of an admittedly inferior force may be sharply greater than it has ever been before.” Kenneth Waltz concurred, “Even with numbers immensely disproportionate, a small force strongly inhibits the use of a large one.” Having the largest nuclear arsenal means nothing if an opponent can survive an initial strike with enough weapons intact to ensure devastating retaliation. Deterrence—as understood during the Cold War—only requires “enough weapons to destroy the other’s cities; this capability is an absolute, not a relative one.” This fundamental characteristic of the nuclear age cannot be altered by any amount of flexibility or military superiority. The concept of “nuclear primacy” reflects an attempt to conventionalize nuclear weapons, which ultimately distorts more than it explains.

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18 Kenneth Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities” *APSR* 84:3 (1990), 734.
Nuclear Proliferation & Adversaries: Deterring the United States

Since the U.S. is no longer deterred from intervening in areas that would have previously attracted Soviet opposition, states formerly protected by Soviet security arrangements now have reason to pursue their own nuclear deterrent.\textsuperscript{22} Adversaries of the remaining superpower, unable to align with a competing superpower for security guarantees, will be limited to asymmetric strategies such as pursuing an independent nuclear capability.

During bipolarity, non-superpowers could balance externally against a threatening superpower by aligning with the rival superpower. External balancing is more difficult in a system with a single superpower. The security concerns caused by the remaining superpower can no longer be kept in check by the security guarantees of a superpower ally. External balancing remains an option. But an anti-hegemonic alliance requires a larger number of allies. As coalition membership increases, so do the complications of coalition maintenance. More members make balancing more difficult because members of larger groups have smaller incentives to contribute to the collective good.\textsuperscript{23} Since all members benefit from greater security, regardless of whether or not they pay for it themselves, “the standard logic of collective action predicts balancing capabilities are likely to be systematically undersupplied.”\textsuperscript{24} Collective action involves greater transaction costs. Members of the countervailing coalition will be tempted to free-ride or buck-pass. States that can increase their own military capabilities (internal balancing) will be able to provide their own security much more reliably than an external-balancing arrangement.\textsuperscript{25} Those who cannot afford a massive conventional-arms buildup might find an internal-balance shortcut via nuclear force.

Just as the Soviet Union’s neighbors were “primarily impressed by the war-fighting capacity of her conventional forces, and the rest of the world by her growing capacity to project that force beyond her frontiers,” international focus has been—and will continue to be—focused mainly on the war-fighting capacity of American conventional forces.\textsuperscript{26} And just as nuclear forces allowed NATO “to face off against the far superior conventional might of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact,” the United States’ opponents will likely view nuclear weapons as “the great equalizer” of the post-Cold War conventional disparity.\textsuperscript{27} Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo’s quantitative analysis of nuclear-proliferation determinants lends empirical support to the deductive inference: “States facing major conventional security threats may use nuclear proliferation to counteract conventional disadvantage.”\textsuperscript{28}

Superior American nuclear force has little influence on adversaries’ nuclear decisions and does not protect against rising nuclear threats. Improvements in the United States’ nuclear forces “will have little or no direct effect on the nuclear choices of others—either to stimulate them to acquire nuclear weapons or to discourage them from doing so,” according to Kurt

\textsuperscript{22} Gartzke & Jo, “Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation,” 185.
\textsuperscript{25} Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 168.
\textsuperscript{27} Kurt Campbell, “Nuclear Proliferation beyond Rogues” Washington Quarterly 26:1 (2002/03), 12.
Campbell and Robert Einhorn's research. They argue that, “the behavior of most countries will be influenced not by their perceptions of the specific qualities of the U.S. nuclear arsenal (old or new, large or small) but by their judgment of the willingness of the United States to bring its unprecedented conventional military superiority to bear—either on their behalf or in opposition to them.”

The possibility of U.S. intervention in a given region is responsible for proliferation among states with interests counter to those of the United States. Michael Tkacik observes:

NBC weapons may be viewed as a partial answer to US conventional superiority . . . regardless of whether the US tries to avoid such a perception. With little help from the US, others have recognized that nuclear weapons may serve as a primary balancer to US power. Here, US conventional superiority actually encourages WMD proliferation.

Similarly, Bruce Blair and Chen Yali conclude that American conventional primacy, rather than U.S. nuclear capabilities, poses the most salient threat to China’s nuclear deterrent capability. The number of nuclear weapons needed to deter a first strike by the United States is very low. Having—or credibly claiming to have—even a few nuclear weapons is usually sufficient to raise the possible costs of a nuclear exchange well above the potential gains. Once the ability to retaliate is secure, disparity between nuclear forces is of little consequence.

China’s “minimum deterrence” nuclear strategy is built on the belief that a large, sophisticated nuclear force can be deterred by a much smaller nuclear arsenal. Premier Zhou Enlai recognized “the key [to deterrence with nuclear weapons] does not lie with their quantity, rather, we need to have a minimum amount, quality and variety.” Iran and North Korea share the view of Chinese strategists, “all it takes are a few hidden nuclear bombs to offset the U.S. nuclear juggernaut.” Deterrence is derived from risk; when U.S. cities are involved, only a slight chance of use is required for deterrence to operate. This leads Blair and Yali to conclude that “U.S. nuclear primacy is an academic artifice,” which they argue, “offers no exploitable political leverage.”

The fact that no other state holds a position comparable to that of the United States complicates adversarial intentions in two ways. It means that the force disparity between the U.S. and any other state will be difficult to overcome. And that there is no alternative polar power for states to align with for protection from the U.S. forming an alliance or coalition.

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30 “Rogue states share one common characteristic,” according to Robert Dujarric, “they are small or medium sized nations that have achieved some success in thwarting American policy.” Dujarric, “North Korea: Risks and Rewards of Engagement” Journal of International Affairs 54:2 (2001), 467.
(externally balancing) against a superpower is simplified by aligning with a rival superpower. Without this option, states threatened by the U.S. will seek security by increasing their own defensive capabilities (internal balancing). Under these circumstances, the demand for nuclear weapons will increase as states realize that nuclear force offers an effective and feasible means of deterring the United States.

The 1991 Gulf War revealed the reach of American power—unchecked by concern with Soviet reactions—and caused potential targets of U.S. force to reconsider the deterrent value of developing their own nuclear capability. For the Arab states,” Robert Lieber argues, “the end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR meant a dwindling of weapons, money, diplomatic support and deterrence of Israel and the United States.” With no superpower rival inhibiting U.S. freedom to project its influence throughout the world, a small nuclear arsenal is very useful to any state interested in keeping the U.S. at a distance. This would allow them to credibly threaten the U.S. with costs far greater than almost any expected benefits of U.S. involvement.

States targeted by the U.S. find their conventional forces insufficient. Nuclear weapons offer these states the quickest defense against American conventional power, if not the only defense. Harold Brown cites deterring an attack by a conventionally-superior opponent as one of the factors driving the nuclear aspirations of China, Iran, North Korea, Israel, Pakistan, and possibly India (vis-à-vis China). Nuclear weapons are sought for their ability to deter conventionally superior powers and their counter-value potential against concentrations of military force, such as ports of air bases. The nuclear appetites of states like Iran or North Korea “are not whetted by anything the United States does with its nukes, but are driven by regional power dynamics and the desire to offset U.S. conventional superiority.”

**Extending Extended Deterrence: Limiting Allied Nuclear Proliferation**

Extended deterrence is critical for minimizing the security concerns of our allies and maintaining an environment that does not encourage independent nuclear capabilities. Quantitative analysis has shown evidences that proliferation is less likely among states covered by a patron state’s nuclear security guarantee. The International Security Advisory Board reports that guarantees of protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella “have been, and continue to be, the single most important reason many allies have foresworn nuclear weapons.” Rebecca Hersman and Robert Peters found that U.S. pressure and security guarantees were the main factors in the rollback of South Korean and Taiwanese nuclear

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programs.\textsuperscript{44} Lewis Dunn believes “U.S. security alliances with other countries have been the most important nonproliferation actions ever taken.”\textsuperscript{45}

Polarity is an important factor in allied responses to U.S. power. Extended deterrence is more difficult in a unipolar world because the commitments of the sole superpower are less credible than earlier alliances, which were reinforced by the superpower rivalry of a bipolar international system. The U.S. is no longer concerned with containing the spread of the Soviet Union and may not be interested in continuing Cold War security arrangements in various regions. States in these areas, facing regional threats without U.S. protection, will need to provide their own security. Nuclear weapons may be an appealing option in these circumstances.

Diminished structural constraints on the United States permit greater freedom in pursuing American interests and, in some cases, reduced sensitivity to the objections of others. With no superpower adversary to contain and little need for allies—or reason to fear their realignment with a rival power—the U.S. is free to disengage from allies and areas it no longer considers strategically important.

**What Does Proliferation Cost?**

While discussing Iranian nuclear intentions with reporters from the New York Times, Jacques Chirac mentioned that, “Having one or perhaps a second bomb a little later, well, that’s not very dangerous.” He added that a nuclear weapon would “be of no use to [Iran],” and asked, “Where will [Iran] drop it, this bomb? On Israel? It would not have gone 200 meters into the atmosphere before Tehran would be razed.”\textsuperscript{46} Chirac’s statements drew criticism from official circles but some believe he may have been right.\textsuperscript{47}

Victor Asal and Kyle Beardsley’s research adds to the argument that more nuclear weapons states would make the world more stable.\textsuperscript{48} But the central concern driving U.S. opposition to the spread of nuclear weapons—as Waltz sees it—is that “if weak countries have some they will cramp our style. Militarily punishing small countries for behavior we dislike would become much more perilous.”\textsuperscript{49} The argument that spreading nuclear weapons will also spread stability has less appeal for the United States, according to Betts, “since it has been accustomed to attacking small countries with impunity when it felt justified and provoked.”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{46} He later tried to retract the statements, “[I] should rather have paid attention to what I was saying and understood that perhaps I was on the record.” Sciolino & Bennhold, “Chirac Strays from Assailing a Nuclear Iran” *New York Times* (1 February 2007).  
When we consider the cost to us of trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons we should not lose sight of the fact that widespread nuclear proliferation would mean a substantial erosion of the margin of power which our great wealth and industrial base have long given us relative to much of the rest of the world. Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons prolongs the United States’ ability to exercise preponderant conventional force in strategically important regions without the threat of nuclear retaliation. The United States’ ability to project power throughout the world is undermined regionally by unconventional/asymmetric efforts to deter invasion or frustrate other U.S. objectives. In terms of opportunity costs, the U.S. pays a higher price for nuclear proliferation than any other state.

These opportunity costs do not apply to states lacking force-projection capabilities. The level of expected utility necessary to shift weaker allies’ cost/benefit perception of nuclear proliferation would be lower than that of the United States. Conditions such as a cascade scenario could trigger the spread of nuclear capabilities among U.S. allies via an “insidious dynamic” in which friends collectively reduce the barriers to nuclear weapons by providing each other with mutual support and political/technical assistance.

Nonproliferation Proposals

Nuclear Devaluation

Proponents of nuclear devaluation predict that expanding the target range and deployment methods of U.S. nuclear weapons—as outlined in the NPR—will increase other state’s desire for these weapons. Or that the U.S. may give other countries new reasons to seek nuclear arms by suggesting these weapons might be useful against non-nuclear targets. There is little evidence of a correlation between horizontal proliferation and the nuclear holdings of superpowers. The historical record counters nuclear-devaluation arguments: despite American self-restraint—the U.S. has not produced a nuclear warhead in 15 years—other states continue to pursue nuclear weapons. The belief that other states are more concerned with imitating American positions than their own security and national interests is inaccurate and “enormously self-centered.”

Keith Payne takes aim at the “nuclear devaluation myth,” tracing its roots back to the action-reaction model of U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War, which held that Soviet

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nuclear forces mirrored Washington’s initiative.58 Reapplying this thesis to the relationship between aspiring nuclear states and U.S. nuclear capabilities makes little sense. Even if the U.S. is the main security concern, the state in question will be focused on U.S. conventional rather than nuclear force. And if a state was concerned with U.S. nuclear capabilities, its goal would be the minimal nuclear force required to deter the U.S., rather than the strategic parity or superiority pursued during the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

Current nuclear powers “acquired their nuclear weapons to address their own security interests” and the security concerns of prospective nuclear states will trump any interest they have in imitating U.S. nuclear force reductions.59 States pursuing these weapons understand the sacrifices involved yet still expect the utility of nuclear weapons to be greater than the costs. The risks involved in obtaining these weapons have increased, but so have the rewards. “Whatever else these weapons can do,” writes Robert Jervis, “they can deter all-out invasion, thus rendering them attractive to any state that fears it might be in the Pentagon's gun sights.”60 The U.S. may inadvertently encourage proliferation by raising the status of nuclear and near-nuclear states, attempting to punish states seeking these weapons, but ultimately compromising as states move closer to achieving nuclear capabilities. This is exemplified by U.S. treatment of each member of the “axis of evil.” It will not be easy for U.S. declaratory policy to counter the message that a few nuclear weapons mean the difference between negotiations and regime change.

No-First-Use Doctrine

President George W. Bush and his administration’s Nuclear Posture Review have been accused of initiating a nuclear first-use policy, which many expect will result in global instability and nuclear proliferation, or worse.61 But the United States’ interest in first use—or COFFIN, as Warner Schilling termed the “Capability Of Firing First If Necessary”—is as old as nuclear weapons themselves.62 First use was inherent in the earliest nuclear mission: deterring Soviet conventional forces from overwhelming Western Europe after World War II. Jonathan Schell recognizes that this first-use policy originated during “the very first weeks of the nuclear age.” But historical perspective does not prevent his pronouncement that this “shocking innovation in American nuclear policy . . . [is] casting a new shadow of nuclear danger over the entire planet.”63

Those who advocate no-first-use policies believe proliferation will decline if nuclear weapons states forewarn first use of nuclear weapons through binding international agreements.64 But those who fear first use may not believe these promises, while those who depend on our

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61 Dunn, “The Case for an Enforceable Consensus against NBC First Use,” 82-8; Theresa Hitchens, “Slipping Down the Nuclear Slope: Bush Administration Nuclear Policy Lowers Bar Against Usage” (26 February 2003); David Krieger and Carah Ong, “No First Use” Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (2002); et al.
extended deterrence might see no-first-use commitments as a sign of declining U.S. credibility. Credible deterrence requires not only capability and commitment but the clear communication of these capabilities and commitments.\textsuperscript{65} Publicly declaring a strong aversion to the use of nuclear weapons could lead allies to doubt the credibility of our extended deterrent and ultimately pursue their own nuclear capabilities. In addition to encouraging proliferation under our nuclear umbrella, Ambassador C. Paul Robinson warns that “‘no-first-use policies undermine deterrence by allowing potential aggressors to expect their acts will go unpunished. This would shift the focus of U.S. policy toward favoring the aggressors rather than those who keep the peace.’”\textsuperscript{66}

Implications

Structural forces appear to be operating in favor of nuclear proliferation. The distribution of capabilities and polarity of the international system can provide an overview of the nuclear landscape, but cannot explain or predict the behavior of particular states. The balance of power is an intervening variable or permissive factor. It does not initiate conflicts, create rivalries, or drive nuclear proliferation; it shapes the options available to each state.

Non-systemic factors trigger the initial decision to pursue nuclear weapons programs. An understanding of the motives and interests operating at the individual and state level is critical in assessing specific threats. Combining knowledge of the immediate causes of state actions with an understanding of the systemic dynamic could offer a comprehensive view of current and future nuclear environments.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{65} Michael Tkacik, “Regional Nuclear Powers and U.S. Policy” Debating 21st Century Nuclear Issues (CSIS, 2006); further analysis of communication difficulties: Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics.

\textsuperscript{66} Ambassador C. Paul Robinson, “Is There a Purpose for Deterrence After the Cold War?” (Presented to the Project on Nuclear Issues (PONI) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 June 2004), 9-10.

\textsuperscript{67} I wish this conclusion could have offered more definitive solutions but I did not want to overstate the significance of what was actually found. I hope to continue this research—applying more methods and cases. Any suggestions or questions would be greatly appreciated. I would like to thank everyone at PONI for their helpful comments and for making this opportunity possible.