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Alexandre Debs, Nuno P. Monteiro. *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation.* Cambridge Studies in International Relations Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 648 pp. $99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-10809-7.

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Why do states seek or forego nuclear weapons? Why are there only nine nuclear weapons states rather than many more as scholars and statesmen expected at various points in the past? Why did four countries renounce their nuclear arsenals and many others abandon the development of nuclear weapons? And why have nuclear weapons apparently been unattractive for the large majority of states? The engagement of scholars with these puzzles of nuclear proliferation has produced a substantial body of studies that focus on the external environment of states, their domestic characteristics, or the characteristics of individual decision makers. In their book *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation*, Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro introduce a new and sophisticated theoretical framework in the tradition of realist theories of international relations and accordingly locate the relevant factors for the (non-)acquisition of nuclear weapons in the security environment of states.

This book comes at a crucial point in time. Russia's interventionism, North Korea's push toward a nuclear deterrent, and uncertainty regarding US security commitments in view of President Donald Trump's pledge to put "America First" have reignited debates about autonomous nuclear arsenals in South Korea, Japan, and Germany.[1] In addition, countries in the Middle East still worry about the Iranian nuclear program and the long-term perspective of a latent or manifest nuclear-weapons capability in Iran. A fresh look at security-related factors that shape the willingness and opportunity of states to acquire nuclear weapons is therefore highly relevant for scholars and decision makers.

The strategic theory of proliferation that Debs and Monteiro introduce in *Nuclear Politics* proceeds from the argument that an understanding of nuclear proliferation requires scholars to broaden their focus from individual (potential) proliferators to "the interaction between all the states involved in, and affected by, the spread of nuclear weapons" (p. 4). So their theory addresses the interaction between proliferators, their adversaries, and their allies. Rooting their work in rational-choice theory, Debs and Monteiro assume that the behavior of these actors follows a calculation of costs and benefits. Accordingly, they argue that "a state will be willing to proliferate only when the security benefit of proliferation is greater than this cost." How adversaries and allies react to the nuclear ambitions of a state also follows from appraisals of costs and benefits. For example, "it will only be rational for an adversary to launch a counterproliferation preventive war if

this action is less costly than the consequences of allowing the state to build nuclear weapons" (p. 6).

At the core of the theory is the argument that the acquisition of nuclear weapons hinges on the willingness and the opportunity of a state. These two dimensions in turn depend "on three underlying strategic variables: the level of security threat [a state] faces, its relative power vis-à-vis its adversaries, and the level of reliability of allied commitments to its security" (p. 7). As the authors emphasize in the section on research design, they do not understand these variables in an objectivist-materialist sense, but—given a host of problems with their measurement—they rather focus on how key decision makers perceive external threats, conventional power, and the reliability of allies.

Debs and Monteiro identify two constellations of these variables that are conducive for nuclear acquisition, or two "causal pathways to proliferation." As they emphasize, "these are the only configurations of the strategic environment that are likely to result in nuclear proliferation" (p. 57). In the first pathway, a state develops the willingness to acquire nuclear weapons in view of a serious security threat and the absence of an external "security sponsor." In addition, conventional power gives the state the opportunity to implement a nuclear weapons program because it raises the costs for preventive strikes by its enemies (e.g., the case of the Soviet Union). This leads the authors to challenge the widespread argument that nuclear weapons are especially attractive for weak countries. They argue instead that "the weak are unlikely to get them"; "weak unprotected states may have the willingness, but will not have the opportunity to acquire the bomb," because they are vulnerable to external military intervention (e.g., Iraq and Iran) (pp. 46, 59). In the second pathway, a state's willingness to acquire nuclear weapons develops in view of external security threats and unreliable security guarantees of an ally. In this case, the opportunity to proliferate follows from relative conventional strength or the appraisal that the commitment of the ally is sufficiently high to make external military intervention very costly for adversaries. Whether and how an ally seeks to deter the proliferation attempt of its protégé eventually depends on the perceived risk of escalation following from the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the conventional strength of the proliferator. A high risk of escalation will induce an ally to counter the ambitions of its protégé (e.g., the case of Germany), whereas a low risk will lead an ally to tolerate them (e.g., the case of France). As for the ways and means that allies use to thwart the nuclearization of their protégé, the authors argue that a sticks-based approach is more likely to be effective against weak protégés, whereas a carrots-based approach is more likely to work against stronger protégés.

The authors then test their theory with a research design that proceeds in two steps. In a first step (chapter 3), they focus on the empirical pattern of nuclear proliferation and quantitative measures of their key variables and find that this pattern supports their theoretical framework. In a second step (chapters 4-6), they use a comparative research design and process tracing in an impressive number of sixteen cases studies. To the best of my knowledge, no other work in the literature on the causes of nuclear proliferation covers so much ground.[2] Yet the book also includes a number of aspects that require further thought.

First, Debs and Monteiro argue that "the key to understanding nuclear proliferation is to characterize the ***attractiveness*** of nuclear weapons for the potential proliferator, the credibility of an adversary's threat of preventive war, and the effectiveness of an ally's guarantees of protection and threats of abandonment" (emphasis added, p. 35). In their theoretical framework, the attractiveness of nuclear weapons follows from a variable and a constant: the perception of a state's security environment is the variable, fundamental assump-

tions about the nature of nuclear weapons are the constant. As far as the latter is concerned, Debs and Monteiro note that they "rely solely on the consensual assumption that nuclear possession boosts the ability of the state to deter aggression on its territory and the uncontroversial view that a nuclear arsenal is also of some use in deterring escalatory threats issued against the state in response to actions it undertakes in pursuit of its other goals" (p. 40).[3] Yet, at the same time, their case studies suggest that state leaders have not universally held these assumptions and that the assumptions of leaders have changed over time. In their case study of China, Debs and Monteiro outline that Mao Zedong's assumption about the nature of military conflict "were not a priori conducive to a nuclear-weapon program" and that he only warmed to nuclear weapons in view of nuclear threats by the United States (p. 197). So, counterfactually, Mao's thoughts could have developed differently in the absence of a military confrontation between China and the United States on the Korean Peninsula. In their case study on Sweden, the authors quote then-foreign minister Östen Undén as noting in a memo that "if Sweden managed to produce atomic bombs—which by their nature are highly offensive weapons—our territory would become a more dangerous neighborhood as seen from the Soviet Union, as Sweden could become [*sic*] forced into a war because of pressure from western powers" (p. 184). So in this understanding, nuclear weapons are not an asset or a means of enhancing a state's security but rather a liability as they invite foreign intervention due to their offensive nature. As Annette Messemer notes in her study of Konrad Adenauer's engagement with nuclear weapons, Germany's chancellor "concluded that nuclear weapons might deter a war at a nuclear level, and even play some role in deterring conflict at the conventional level, [but] was convinced that they could not credibly serve as a deterrent at all levels of possible aggression."[4] This suggests that assumptions about the nature of nuclear weapons vary between actors and over time, as do perceptions of a state's security environment. In the case study on Germany's nuclear ambitions, Debs and Monteiro note that "of course, German leaders were not unanimously in favor of nuclear acquisition," but "during the relevant period, the key West German leaders were actively pronuclear" (p. 401n198). Yet, in a counterfactual scenario, what would have happened if the key West German leaders had been vehemently opposed to nuclear weapons on grounds of their perceived immorality or ineffectiveness?

As a next step in the development of this strategic theory, the attractiveness of nuclear weapons could be conceived as a product. A refined version of the strategic theory of nuclear proliferation should conceive the attractiveness of nuclear weapons as the result of perceptions regarding the ***necessity*** and ***utility*** of nuclear weapons. Different perceptions of utility could be located on a continuum that ranges from high utility (nuclear weapons as instruments of war fighting and deterrence) over medium utility (nuclear weapons as instruments of deterrence) to low/no utility (nuclear weapons as ineffective or immoral weapons).

Second, the threat or use of counterproliferation measures plays an important role in the theoretical framework of ***Nuclear Politics***. Debs and Monteiro define "counterproliferation" as "any attempt to prevent a country from acquiring nuclear weapons by threatening (implicity or explicitly) with military action." In contrast to counterproliferation, they understand "nonproliferation" as "any measure designed to deter proliferation without the threat of military force. Whereas counterproliferation tends to be used vis-à-vis adversaries, nonproliferation is the usual approach towards nuclearization attempts by allied and friendly states" (p. 2n3). This definition conveys an overly narrow understanding of counterproliferation, which actually includes a broad range of measures, such as engagement, sanctions, and the

use of force with varying degrees of intensity. The authors also point to this range of measures when they note in chapter 2 that adversaries "will resort to different counterproliferation measures, up to and including preventive war" (p. 35; see also p. 38). In their case studies of Iran and Iraq, they also mention combinations of sanctions and threats of military force. In my view, Mark Fitzpatrick offers a more suitable distinction between nonproliferation as all the measures that seek to prevent a state from acquiring nuclear weapons and counterproliferation as the measures that states use "when prevention fails." So, "the distinction lies in the timing and purpose, not the measures themselves," although this distinction also has its problems, as Fitzpatrick acknowledges.[5]

In line with their definition of counterproliferation, Debs and Monteiro state that the "efficacy of softer counter- and nonproliferation measures depends on the underlying credibility of threats to use military force against or in support of the potential proliferator" (pp. 38-39). In particular, they argue that the tandem of sanctions and threats with the use of force is effective in countering proliferation. In the case of Iraq, for example, "the United States was able to impose crippling sanctions ... that—along with the ever-present threat of force—effectively terminated [Iraq's] nuclear program" (p. 83; see also p. 141). In the case of Iran, Debs and Monteiro argue likewise that "a robust sanctions regime backed by the threat of military action" forced Iran to back down (p. 173). In my view, the authors overdraw the dependence of the effectiveness of sanctions on accompanying threats with military force, and thus risk neglecting other factors that may have an impact on the efficacy of sanctions. Iran's acceptance to limit its nuclear program through the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is a good case in point: it seems that the severe economic consequences of sanctions (especially after the European Union had hardened its sanction regime), diplomatic efforts of European countries and EU representatives, and the changing leadership in both the United States and Iran were key factors that led to the nuclear accord. On the other hand, there are reasons to suspect that Iranian decision makers may have doubted the credibility of a preventive use of force by the United States. President Barack Obama had pledged to end two costly and unpopular wars and to scale back involvement in the Middle East. In the case of an attack against its nuclear facilities, Iran would probably have reacted with direct attacks against US installations or allies in the region, indirect attacks through Shiite militia in Iraq or Hezbollah in Israel, or attempts to block the Strait of Hormuz. So an attack against Iran would have aggravated regional conflicts and drawn the United States even deeper into them, which raises questions about the credibility of US military intervention.

As a minor aspect, this capacity for asymmetric retaliation also challenges the authors' understanding of (military) power. As they note in the conclusion, "only powerful U.S. adversaries—those capable of putting up a good fight in the case of U.S. preventive counterproliferation military action—are likely to acquire nuclear weapons" (p. 450). Iran's armed forces are obviously considerably smaller and less technologically advanced than US forces and so it is questionable whether Tehran could actually put up a good fight with the United States. Yet the various ways through which Iran can engage in asymmetric retaliation also increase the costs of preventive action and thus affect the cost-benefit calculations of its adversaries.

Third and finally, although I agree with the authors that "the United States has been at the forefront of efforts to stymie the spread of nuclear weapons" (p. 1), I think that *Nuclear Politics* is overly focused on the United States or geared toward a US audience (see, in particular, the introduction and conclusion, which includes a section titled "Implications for U.S. Nonproliferation Poli-

cy"). This focus also makes sense in the context of the theoretical framework and its emphasis on military power. Nevertheless, it would have been worthwhile to think about the implications that the book may have for actors beyond the United States and, in particular, for the EU and its member states, which have also been very active in containing the spread of nuclear weapons.

Notwithstanding these issues, ***Nuclear Politics*** makes a highly ambitious, theoretically innovative, and empirically rich contribution to the literature on the causes of nuclear proliferation. It offers a very elaborate, security-based perspective on the decision of states to seek or forego nuclear weapons and will be an important point of departure for further studies.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Rudolf Herzog, "German Nukes Would Be a National Tragedy," ***Foreign Policy*** (March 10, 2017), http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/10/german-nukes-would-be-a-national-tragedy/; Josef Joffe, "Germany Has Taken Itself Out of the Nuclear Running," ***Financial Times*** (February 13, 2017), https://www.ft.com/content/4a60efd8-f1fd-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608; and Maximilian Terhalle, "If Germany Goes Nuclear, Blame Trump before Putin," ***Foreign Policy*** (April 4, 2017), http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/03/if-germany-goes-nuclear-blame-trump/.

[2]. T. V. Paul's work includes fourteen case studies and the edited book by William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova covers twelve cases. See T. V. Paul, ***Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons*** (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); and William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, ***Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century: A Comparative Perspective***, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[3]. As Steven Flank argues, "security considerations may indeed motivate the pursuit of nuclear weapons because they are seen as the ultimate purveyor of international power or as the token of great power status. But this formulation begs the question of how nuclear weapons come to be seen in this way." This passage also suggests that nuclear weapons may as well come to be seen in different ways. See Steven Flank, "Nonproliferation Policy: A Quintet for Two Violas?" ***The Nonproliferation Review*** 1, no. 3 (1994): 74.

[4]. See Annette Messemer, "Konrad Adenauer: Defence Diplomat on the Backstage," in ***Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945***, ed. John Lewis Gaddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernst R. May, and Jonathan Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 243.

[5]. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Non-proliferation and Counter-proliferation: What Is the Difference?" ***Defense & Security Analysis*** 24, no. 1 (2008): 75.

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