Beyond Optimism and Pessimism: The Effect of Nuclear Proliferation

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Question

Question:

What is the effect of nuclear proliferation on international politics?

The State of the Debate:

- Proliferation Optimism vs. Proliferation Pessimism
The Limitations of the Optimism/Pessimism Debate

1. Focuses on aggregate, but not distributional, effects.

2. Focuses on a narrow range of proliferation effects.

3. Cannot explain proliferation preferences.

4. Limited application to nuclear proliferation policy.
Question and Answer

Question:

What is the effect of nuclear proliferation on international politics?

Answer:

- Nuclear proliferation constrains the conventional military freedom of action of power-projecting states.

- Nuclear proliferation is bad for power-projecting states, but can be good for non-power-projecting states.

- Power-projecting states will be more likely to oppose nuclear proliferation. Non-power-projecting states will be more likely to support it.
Outline

1) Definitions of Key Terms

2) Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation
   - Power-Projecting-States
   - Non-Power-Projecting States

3) Counterarguments

4) Conclusions
1) Defining Key Terms: Power-Projection

A **Power-Projecting State** is a state that has the ability to fight a full-scale, conventional, military, ground-war against a potential nuclear-weapon-state.

A **Non-Power-Projecting State** is a state that lacks that capability.
1) Defining Key Terms: Proliferation Preferences

States can either:
- oppose nuclear proliferation in a particular case.
- support nuclear proliferation in a particular case.
- be agnostic about nuclear proliferation in a particular case.

A variety of indicators can distinguish a state’s proliferation preferences such as:
- private and public statements about the desirability of nuclear proliferation in a particular case.
- actions related to help or hinder a particular state’s nuclear program.
2) Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation

Nuclear proliferation threatens power-projecting states more than it threatens non-power-projecting states because it constrains their conventional military freedom of action.

For this reason, power-projecting states will be more likely to oppose nuclear proliferation.

Non-power-projecting states will be more likely to be agnostic, or support, nuclear proliferation.
2) Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation: Power-Projecting States

Nuclear proliferation threatens power-projecting states because it:

1. deters military intervention.
2. reduces strategic influence.
3. triggers regional instability.
4. undermines alliance structures.
5. dissipates strategic attention.
6. sets off further nuclear proliferation.

For these reasons, power-projecting states are more likely to oppose nuclear proliferation.

This effect is NOT limited to the United States.
2) Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation: Non-Power-Projecting States

Nuclear proliferation does not threaten non-power-projecting states because for them it does not:

1. deter military intervention.
2. reduce strategic influence.
3. trigger regional instability.
4. undermine alliance structures.
5. dissipate strategic attention.
6. set off further nuclear proliferation.

For these reasons, non-power-projecting states are less likely to oppose nuclear proliferation.
2) Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation: Non-Power-Projecting States

Non-power-projecting states can support nuclear proliferation in order to impose these costs on other more powerful states.

Cases:
France to Israel, 1959-1965
China to Pakistan, 1980s
Pakistan to Iran, Libya, and North Korea, 1987-2002
India?
3) Counterarguments: Power or Possession?

- Some have suggested that nuclear-weapon-states should be more opposed to the spread of nuclear weapons. (e.g. Quester, Pilat).

- Power, not Possession.
  - Nuclear-weapon-states often support nuclear proliferation.
  - Nonnuclear-weapon-states often oppose nuclear proliferation.
  - Statesmen tell us why they fear nuclear proliferation.
3) Counterarguments: 
Force or Friendship?

- Some have argued that states oppose nuclear proliferation to enemies, but support it to their friends.

- “Nations have no permanent friends, only permanent interests.” Lord Palmerston
  - U.S. has always opposed nuclear proliferation to allies.
  - Negative strategic effects when allies acquire nuclear weapons.
  - States often support nuclear proliferation to nonallies.
5) Conclusions

Theory:

*Understanding the effect of nuclear proliferation:*
  - Optimism/Pessimism debate is missing the point.
  - Constrains conventional military power.
    - Bad for power-projecting states.
    - Can be good for non-power-projecting states.

*The first theory of nuclear proliferation preferences.*

Policy:

*Why the United States struggles to secure international cooperation on nuclear proliferation problems.*
QUESTIONS?
The Advantages of the Strategic Theory of Nuclear Proliferation

1. Highlights distributional effects of nuclear proliferation.

2. Considers a wider array of proliferation effects.

3. Provides an explanation of proliferation preferences.

4. Important implications for nuclear proliferation policy.
US/UK Nuclear Cooperation

From 1945 to 1952 “Britain received very little help from (the United States); the only major area of mutual support had been uranium procurement. Britain’s deterrent was perforce an independent one. Furnished, it is true, with information from the wartime sojourn of her scientists in North America, Britain found she could carry out the whole of the first phase of her project up to the first bomb test perfectly well by her own native efforts, supplemented with some essential help in facilities from Canada…

US/UK Nuclear Cooperation

...Britain...pressed relentlessly, throughout the period of this book, for the atomic collaboration which the United States was so reluctant to concede. Collaboration in uranium supplies, although imperfect, had been close and mutually advantageous, and there had been some very useful exchanges in intelligence, health and safety and a few other areas of common interest. But in general there was no exchange of information and no exchange of materials other than uranium...

US/UK Nuclear Cooperation

... “Nevertheless, full-scale collaboration was frequently dangled temptingly before British eyes and the British were prepared to pay a high price in the hope of seizing it...Every opportunity was taken to ask for renewed collaboration. Later it was believed that this refusal to accept a final ‘no’ to these requests, this constant hammering on the door, led to the very full American cooperation especially in atomic weapons which began in 1958.”