Social Action, Rogue Reaction: US Post-Cold War Nuclear Counterproliferation Strategies

Which US post-Cold War counterproliferation strategies towards nuclear aspirants have been most successful and why? The debate over arms control strategies has been split between two camps: those who argue that threats such as military preemption and economic sanctions can deter adversaries from developing nuclear weapons and those who claim that such threats spur on weapons development and cause arms races. In this dissertation, I argue that both are wrong: strategies involving the use of military or economic tools alone are not only unsuccessful but are actually counterproductive. I demonstrate using the cases of North Korea and Iran that including social benefits in the form of symbolic and diplomatic gestures is crucial to the success of these strategies.

While clear, coherent, and credible economic or military threats can contribute towards a short-term slowdown or a freeze on nuclear activities, concurrent social overtures are necessary to ensure that freeze holds. Symbolic gestures such as allowing aspirants to retain some civilian nuclear technologies and political incentives like offering full diplomatic recognition are crucial for the success of counterproliferation strategies. These measures can help freeze a program in the short term through allowing proliferants to save face and roll it back in the longer term by changing the structural incentives that lead states to seek nuclear weapons.

To test my argument, I connect abstract theories of why states act the way they do with concrete explanations for why states might seek or be persuaded to forego nuclear weapons. Military capabilities (realism), economic needs (liberalism), and social desires (constructivism) provide both motivations for nuclear proliferation and opportunities for states to counter these motivations. I combine these theories with spiral and deterrent models to generate hypotheses regarding the effects of different types of strategies on nuclear outcomes. I include the effects of three intervening mechanisms: domestic political structures, positive feedback loops that can amplify actions, and the effects of other states' policies.

In testing these hypotheses, I break down strategies into individual actions directed at either suppressing the demand for or halting the supply of nuclear technologies to individual proliferants. I use vector autoregression to uncover action-reaction cycles and establish general interaction patterns between the United States and proliferators. I then use within-case congruence procedures to compare theoretical predictions of the effects of different types of strategies with nuclear outcomes. Finally, I perform a cross-case comparison of how the structure of proliferation networks among these second-tier nuclear aspirants has affected development times.

I break my analysis into seven chapters. In my introductory chapter, I motivate my question and review policy recommendations for counterproliferation strategies. In the second chapter, I construct my theoretical framework, reviewing theories of nuclear proliferation and giving a technical overview of proliferation. In my third chapter, I explain my quantitative methodology and test it on interactions between North Korea and the United States. In my fourth and fifth chapters I examine two in-depth case studies on the proliferants that were the most active in the post-Cold War era: North Korea and Iran. In the sixth chapter, I discuss the structure and effects of the A.Q. Khan proliferation network on multiple proliferants, then conclude in my seventh chapter with implications and recommendations.