Proliferation Hotspots: Why States Acquire Nuclear Weapons

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons remain the most consequential instruments of coercion and assurance in international politics. Eight decades after the first atomic detonations, the forces that drive states to seek nuclear capabilities have not disappeared; they have evolved. Some governments perceive existential threats and seek the ultimate deterrent. Others pursue status, bargaining leverage, or domestic political gains. This book asks a deceptively simple question—why do some states acquire nuclear weapons while others with comparable means and motives do not?—and offers a rigorous, policy-relevant answer grounded in theory, evidence, and comparative analysis.

The central claim advanced here is that proliferation is best explained by the interaction of security imperatives, political incentives, and economic constraints. External pressures—rivalries, territorial disputes, alliance reliability—shape a state’s demand for nuclear options. Domestic institutions and leadership beliefs filter those pressures, converting them into policy choices that can accelerate, stall, or reverse nuclear pursuits. Economic factors, from growth prospects to the bite of sanctions and opportunity costs, condition the feasibility and timing of such choices. No single driver is sufficient; what matters is how these forces combine in specific strategic contexts.

This study is analytical rather than narrative. It engages the leading schools of thought—realist security arguments, domestic politics and bureaucratic competition, and constructivist accounts of norms and identity—and tests their expectations against historical and contemporary cases. The approach blends structured, focused comparison with process tracing and draws on open-source evidence, secondary scholarship, and available datasets. Throughout, it treats proliferation not as an inevitability but as a contingent outcome that can be shaped by policy. The objective is to equip analysts and decision-makers with tools that clarify when and why risks rise, and which levers are most likely to work.

International responses to suspected nuclear pursuits sit at the heart of this story. Sanctions, export controls, and interdictions can raise costs, but they rarely succeed in isolation. Security guarantees, reassurance, and credible diplomatic off-ramps can dampen demand when threat perceptions are the primary driver. Norms embedded in the global nonproliferation regime influence state behavior, but they require enforcement and adaptation to remain effective. Civil nuclear cooperation, too, presents a dual-use dilemma, offering benefits for energy and development while posing challenges for proliferation management. Understanding these trade-offs is essential for designing policies that deter acquisition without foreclosing peaceful technological progress.

The chapters that follow move from foundations to applications. Early chapters develop a common vocabulary and analytical framework, then examine the security, political, and economic drivers in turn. Subsequent chapters explore technology access, procurement networks, and the operation of international institutions, before turning to a series of in-depth case studies spanning different regions, regime types, and outcomes—including acquisition, hedging, and rollback. The final chapters translate insights into practical forecasting tools and a policy playbook oriented toward prevention, crisis management, and long-run institutional resilience.

This book is written for practitioners and scholars who need clarity more than rhetoric. It does not claim to predict the future with precision; rather, it offers a disciplined way to assess risk, identify early warning signs, and weigh interventions under uncertainty. By tracing how motives, means, and opportunities converge—or fail to converge—it shows where policy can make a difference and where it is likely to fall short. The hope is that, with better frameworks and better questions, the international community can reduce incentives to proliferate, strengthen the barriers that matter, and preserve a world in which nuclear use remains unthinkable.

Chapter One: The Puzzle of Proliferation: Competing Theories and Evidence

The question of why states acquire nuclear weapons is a complex enigma, one that has captivated scholars and policymakers since the dawn of the atomic age. It’s not as simple as flipping a switch or ordering a pizza; rather, it involves a confluence of factors, a delicate dance between perceived threats, internal political machinations, and economic realities. To unravel this puzzle, various schools of thought in international relations have offered competing theories, each illuminating a different facet of the decision-making process.

One of the most enduring and influential perspectives comes from realism, a theoretical framework that views international politics as a struggle for power among self-interested states in an anarchic system. From a realist standpoint, states acquire nuclear weapons primarily for security reasons—to deter potential attackers and ensure their survival. In a world lacking a central authority, nuclear weapons are seen as the ultimate guarantor of national security, providing an overwhelmingly destructive force that can balance or maximize a state’s power relative to its adversaries. This perspective gained significant traction during the Cold War, a period characterized by a relentless arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, both driven by fears of an attack from the other.

The logic of deterrence, a cornerstone of realist thought, posits that the threat of nuclear retaliation discourages an adversary from initiating a first strike. The devastating consequences of nuclear warfare, often termed "mutually assured destruction" (MAD), theoretically make a direct war between nuclear-armed states highly improbable. Kenneth Waltz, a prominent neorealist, famously argued that "more may be better," suggesting that nuclear proliferation could actually lead to greater international stability by making the costs of war too high to contemplate. However, even within realism, there are nuances. While some argue that nuclear weapons guarantee absolute security, others are more ambiguous about their deterrent power.

Historical examples often cited in support of the realist perspective include the Soviet Union’s accelerated nuclear program after World War II, driven by fears of a U.S. attack, and China’s development of nuclear weapons in the face of the Korean War and the Taiwan Straits Crisis. India’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons in the 1960s and 70s is also often linked to its security concerns regarding China, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Similarly, Pakistan’s nuclear program was a direct response to India’s capabilities, underscoring a regional security dilemma. For these states, the

acquisition of nuclear weapons was seen as a vital, almost existential, step to protect their interests and ensure their survival in a dangerous world.

However, the realist explanation, while compelling for certain cases, doesn't fully account for the entire spectrum of proliferation decisions. If security were the sole driver, then every state with the technical capacity and perceived threats would inevitably pursue nuclear weapons. Yet, this is clearly not the case. Many states capable of developing nuclear weapons have chosen not to, or have even rolled back their programs. This suggests that other factors are at play, moving beyond a purely security-driven calculus.

This is where domestic politics theories enter the fray, offering a different lens through which to view proliferation. These theories emphasize that a state's decision to acquire nuclear weapons is not solely the result of external pressures, but also a product of internal dynamics, including the interests of political leaders, bureaucratic rivalries, and domestic public opinion. In this view, nuclear weapons can be a tool for leaders to consolidate power, enhance their regime's legitimacy, or appease powerful domestic constituencies like the military or scientific establishments.

For instance, some scholars argue that North Korea's nuclear program is partly driven by a desire for national prestige, both internationally and domestically, and a means for its leaders to demonstrate strength and maintain power. The "Military First Policy" in North Korea, which prioritizes the military, could also incentivize nuclear weapons development to keep military leaders content and loyal. Similarly, while security was a major factor, some argue that the United Kingdom and France pursued nuclear weapons partly to retain a "great power" status in the post-World War II era, and to assert their autonomy from the United States within NATO. These examples highlight how internal political considerations can intertwine with external security concerns to shape nuclear ambitions.

The role of domestic politics becomes particularly significant when there's ambiguity surrounding external threats. When the intensity or nature of a threat is unclear, domestic actors and their agendas can exert a stronger influence on nuclear decision-making. Furthermore, when leaders centralize nuclear policymaking, they can more effectively steer the program according to their internal political objectives. This perspective offers a more granular understanding of the proliferation process, moving beyond the state as a unitary, rational actor.

Beyond security and domestic politics, constructivist theories offer another crucial perspective, arguing that nuclear proliferation is shaped by shared ideas, norms, and identities in the international system. For constructivists, the meaning and significance of nuclear weapons are not inherent; rather, they are socially constructed through interactions among states. Therefore, a state's decision to acquire or forgo nuclear weapons is influenced by its identity, its understanding of its role in the world, and the

prevailing international norms surrounding nuclear weapons.

A classic illustration of the constructivist viewpoint is the observation that "500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons." This is not due to a material difference in the weapons themselves, but because of the established relationship and shared understanding between the US and the UK as allies, versus the perceived hostility and different identity of North Korea. The concept of a "nuclear taboo," an unspoken but powerful norm against the use of nuclear weapons, also reflects a constructivist understanding of how shared ideas can constrain state behavior.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a landmark agreement, is a prime example of a constructivist-informed institution. It established a normative structure that de-legitimized the acquisition of nuclear weapons by additional countries, reinforcing a global norm against proliferation. States that adhere to the NPT and those that defy it are often viewed differently on the international stage, demonstrating the power of norms in shaping state identity and behavior. The varying international responses to the nuclear programs of, say, India and Pakistan (non-signatories to the NPT) versus North Korea (which withdrew from the NPT) illustrate the normative context surrounding proliferation.

Finally, economic factors also play a significant, albeit often understated, role in nuclear proliferation. Developing and maintaining a nuclear weapons program is an incredibly expensive undertaking, requiring substantial investment in research, infrastructure, and skilled personnel. The financial costs can be a significant deterrent for many states, particularly those with limited resources or pressing domestic economic needs. Conversely, for some, the economic benefits of a civilian nuclear energy program, which can provide a pathway to latent nuclear weapons capability, can be an attractive proposition.

Sanctions, imposed by the international community, can also raise the economic costs of proliferation, making it more difficult and expensive for a state to pursue nuclear weapons. However, the effectiveness of sanctions is not always clear-cut and can depend on a country’s economic resilience and its trading relationships. For instance, while comprehensive sanctions significantly impacted Iraq’s economy, sanctions against India after its 1998 nuclear tests were less effective, partly due to India’s established trading partnerships.

Moreover, some argue that developing a nuclear industry, even a civilian one, can stimulate commerce and provide economic benefits, such as the export of uranium. This dual-use nature of nuclear technology—its potential for both peaceful energy generation and weapons development—presents a constant challenge for nonproliferation efforts. The economic allure of nuclear power, combined with the underlying technological capabilities it fosters, can create a powerful incentive for

states to advance their nuclear programs.

In essence, the puzzle of proliferation is rarely solved by a single theoretical key. Rather, it requires a multi-faceted approach, one that considers the interplay of security imperatives, domestic political considerations, and economic realities, all within a broader normative framework. The following chapters will delve deeper into each of these drivers, examining their individual nuances and how they combine in specific contexts to influence a state’s nuclear trajectory. By understanding these competing theories and the evidence that supports them, we can begin to build a more comprehensive and robust framework for predicting and, ultimately, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

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