

Book Reviews

Title: Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave

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Ever since the advent of nuclear weapons, scholars have deliberated upon the effects of nuclear weapons on strategy and policy. By virtue of being an unchallenged mecca of nuclear scholarship, the United States has, apart from driving nuclear politics as well as the instruments of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, introduced and shaped the theoretical contours of nuclear weapons in a bid to dissect their implications. The theory of nuclear deterrence, for instance, became both an academic phenomenon and one of the most attractive policy choices. That said, the discourse related to nuclear weapons was enriched by many a scholar. After Bernard Brodie's rudimentary yet powerful ruminations, the literature was adorned by the works of Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn, Glenn Snyder, and Robert Jervis, to name a few. These giants of the U.S. academy rightly were and are associated with some of the most compelling theories that explain the impact of nuclear weapons.

Be it Schelling's 'threats that leave something to chance', or Kahn's 44-rung escalation ladder, all theoretical disquisitions factor in the colossal destructive capacity that a nuclear device has. This scale of destruction that nuclear weapons can cause is one of the principal elements that underlie the theory of the nuclear revolution. After writing *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* in 1989, Robert Jervis became a veritable leader of the nuclear revolutionaries, whose thoughts continue to be challenged by new scholarship and the very many developments that are taking place in the realms of technology and strategy. Jervis and his fellow travellers repose confidence in the deterrent power of nuclear weapons, and argue that the deterrence-induced security will keep nuclear-armed states from becoming belligerent and challenging the status quo. They contend that nuclear weapons make the world safer and peaceful. Perhaps there is good reason to agree with this assertion given that nuclear dyads have avoided wars while going through what John Lewis Gaddis called the "Long Peace." However, the critics of the theory are in harmony with the makers of the non-proliferation regime, fearing the reactions of those that could acquire nuclear weapons. It is the reactions to nuclear acquisitions that Mark S. Bell theorizes and explains in his new book entitled *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave*. Bell, an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota, investigates how the acquisition of nuclear weapons affects the foreign policies of states that acquire them.

Bell offers a fresh critique of the nuclear revolution theory. Acknowledging the contribution and utility of the theory, Bell's academic

response hinges on answering this question: “how do the states that acquire nuclear weapons respond to that additional security?”(p.3). Bell answers this question by introducing the theory of *nuclear opportunism*. As opposed to the theory of the nuclear revolution, Bell’s theory argues that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states facilitates a range of foreign policy behaviours. Bell identifies six foreign policy behaviours that states did not find tenable before possessing nuclear weapons but become viable after they go nuclear: *aggression, steadfastness, bolstering, independence, expansion, and compromise*. Bell’s characterization is befitting, to say the least, for these broad approaches link a state’s behaviour with both the goal(s) it wants to achieve and the power it has within and outside of an alliance. That said, some of these behaviours could overlap and feed into each other. For example, showing steadfastness may entail being aggressive, depending on what is required of a state to show resolve in safeguarding its interests.

While the theory of the nuclear revolution does not account for variations in the responses of states to nuclear acquisitions, Bell does a good job in adding three critical variables to his theoretical mix. To Bell, the strategic environment in which a country finds itself affects what combination of behaviours it adopts. He writes:

The crux of the theory is that different states find different combinations of these behaviours attractive depending on the strategic circumstances in which the state finds itself. In particular, the nature of the threats the state faces, its position within its alliances, and whether it is increasing or decreasing in relative power all affect which combinations of these behaviours the acquiring state finds attractive (p.9,10).

Bell’s choice of these three variables, as opposed to the others to further explain his theory, is reflective of how he privileges the security factor, much like the nuclear revolutionaries do, in states’ nuclear decision-making equations. While Bell does not nullify the fact that nuclear weapons enhance a state’s security, he does argue that the security garnered through nuclear-possession gives a state more freedom to pursue its goals. He tests his theory by looking at the differences between the pre and post-nuclearization behaviours of the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Africa. Bell’s research-laden work brings to the fore visible, nuclear weapons-driven changes in the behaviours of London, Washington, and Pretoria. However, as oftentimes acknowledged by the author, it is rather difficult to single-out the effects of nuclear weapons on a country’s foreign policy approach and the changes it undergoes. If anything, it would be prudent to see the impact of nuclear weapons in tandem with that of other potential sources of change. Further, while the theory of nuclear opportunism fares fairly well in apprising readers that nuclear weapons bring with them a plethora of previously-unfeasible choices for their possessors, it falls short in fully dealing with their deterrent effects, especially when a state has to face a nuclear-armed

actor. Will a new nuclear power be able to pull off a series of aggressive actions, or become more indomitable, if its nemesis has a robust deterrent in place? This is where Jervis and others stage a resounding comeback. Bell's theory rightly outlines how nuclear weapons open up this set of options. However, it is the deterrent power of the bomb, as emphasized by the revolutionaries, that will deter states from treading those paths, primarily because a similar set of choices will be available to their adversaries too.

The behaviours that could be facilitated by baring one's own teeth, also depend on how leaders in possession of nuclear weapons look at them. Bell has correctly termed it as a variable worth incorporating in future research. If a leader believes that their country's nuclear weapons have a limited, defensive role to play, it is least likely that they will 'use' nuclear weapons to unleash aggression.

However, since the theory convincingly argues that the possession of nuclear weapons increases the basket of relatively lucrative action-items, it is reason enough to dub it useful. The theory certainly offers a new way to look at nuclear weapons. Policymakers, especially those that grapple with non-proliferation and disarmament issues, will find this theory critical in identifying an array of proliferation propellants. Bell's mapping of the likely behaviour of future proliferants is noteworthy. If anything, this theory warns against adopting across-the board, inflexible approaches to dealing with prospective proliferants. It is, however, important to note that even though the theory of nuclear opportunism is a cogent counter to the theory of the nuclear revolution, the latter's powerful explanatory power at some levels, challenges the former. Taken together, these two theories firmly situate nuclear weapons within the wider canvas that is global politics.

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