Introduction

How Do New Nuclear States Behave?

In 1963, a US National Intelligence Estimate attempted to assess how China's foreign policy would change if it acquired nuclear weapons.[1] One paragraph offered a sanguine assessment, arguing that it was unlikely that "the acquisition of a limited nuclear weapons capability would produce major changes in Communist China's foreign policy." The very next paragraph, however, argued that nuclear weapons would affect Chinese foreign policy in important ways, stating that "the Chinese would feel very much stronger [if they acquired nuclear weapons] and this mood would doubtless be reflected in their approach to conflicts on their periphery. . . . The tone of Chinese policy would probably become more assertive." This contradiction did not go unnoticed: a footnote inserted by the acting director of intelligence and research declared that these two statements were "somewhat inconsistent" with each other. Today, policymakers engage in similar debates about newly nuclear states and other states that may acquire nuclear weapons in the future. How do North Korea's nuclear weapons influence its foreign policy today? How might Iran behave if it were to acquire nuclear weapons? How about Saudi Arabia? If US allies such as South Korea or Japan were to acquire nuclear weapons in the future, how would their foreign policy toward the United States change?

The answers to these questions matter greatly. Devising policies or strategies to deal with new nuclear-armed states hinges on understanding how they are likely to behave after acquiring nuclear weapons. A state that is likely to use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression demands different political and military strategies from the United States and the international community than if nuclear acquisition is likely to make the state more peaceful. More broadly, determining the political, economic, or military costs that countries should be prepared to pay to prevent nuclear proliferation hinges on assessing how nuclear weapons affect the behavior of the states that acquire them and how dangerous those effects are. If states typically expand

their interests in world politics or act more belligerently after acquiring nuclear weapons, preventing nuclear acquisition should be a higher priority than if nuclear weapons do not much affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them.

This book seeks to answer these questions. Despite their importance, there is little consensus among scholars or analysts about the answers to them. For example, how would Iran's foreign policies change if it acquired nuclear weapons? Some argue that nuclear weapons would embolden Iran to increase its support for proxy or terrorist groups and that it would use nuclear weapons to coerce and intimidate other states in the region.[2] Others are more relaxed, arguing that Iran's power within the Middle East would remain largely unchanged if it acquired nuclear weapons, and that Iranian efforts at nuclear coercion would be unlikely to work.[3] Indeed, disagreements about these questions are unsurprising given the variety of ways that states have historically used nuclear weapons to pursue their political goals. For example, consider the case of Pakistan. By threatening the early use of nuclear weapons in any conflict, Pakistan has used nuclear weapons as a shield to deter Indian retaliation, enabling Pakistan to pursue low-level aggression and subversion against India with the goal of achieving long-standing revisionist goals in Kashmir and elsewhere.[4] By contrast, the United Kingdom used nuclear weapons very differently when it acquired them in the 1950s. As I discuss in detail in chapter 3, instead of engaging in aggression, Britain used nuclear weapons to try to hold on to what it had: to reassure allies that were increasingly skeptical of Britain's ability to come to their aid, to resist challenges to its position, and to act more independently of the United States. Or consider the United States. In the aftermath of World War II, with the international system in profound flux, a newly nuclear United States put in place a globe-spanning network of alliances and military bases wholly at odds with its prior history of avoiding entangling alliances and staying out of European conflicts. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to expand its commitments while simultaneously demobilizing its armed forces after World War II. With its nuclear arsenal, the United States could maintain (and take on) alliance commitments around the world without deploying the conventional military forces that would previously have been needed to make such commitments credible. These three states, in very different strategic environments, used nuclear weapons in very different ways to advance very different foreign policy goals. Can we explain this variation in the historical record?

Existing Explanations

What do we currently know about how states change their foreign policy when they acquire nuclear weapons? Unfortunately, existing explanations

do not get us very far. The most prominent and elegant account of how nuclear weapons affect international politics is the theory of the nuclear revolution. While different scholars offer somewhat different interpretations of the nuclear revolution, the core argument is that nuclear weapons and the condition of mutual assured destruction transform the nature of international politics.[5] The theory of the nuclear revolution was designed to apply to the interactions between states with secure second-strike capabilities and did not, therefore, directly seek to explain the foreign policies of nuclear-armed states more broadly. Despite this, the logic of the theory, and the mechanisms it identifies, means that the theory contains within it important insights and implications for how states should use nuclear weapons within their foreign policies.

First, theorists of the nuclear revolution argue that nuclear weapons make states more secure. The scale of destruction that nuclear weapons can inflict, the relative ease with which states can secure the ability to strike back after an initial attack (that is, achieve a second-strike capability), and the impossibility of defending against a nuclear attack mean that nuclear weapons offer a powerful deterrent against the most important security threats that states face: invasion or other major attacks.[6] Not only are they excellent tools of deterrence, but theorists of the nuclear revolution argue that nuclear weapons do not offer equivalent offensive benefits to the states that possess them. As a result, nuclear weapons tilt the advantage away from the offense and toward the defense: they "give defenders a large advantage"[7] and "created a revolution for defense advantage."[8] In short, nuclear weapons are primarily (and perhaps exclusively) defensive weapons.

However, the claim that nuclear weapons deter other states does not by itself answer how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policy of the state acquiring nuclear weapons. If nuclear weapons provide deterrent or defensive benefits, how do the states that acquire nuclear weapons respond to that additional security? Theorists of the nuclear revolution tend to make a political judgment about how states should respond to the additional security provided by the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. Because security is the first goal of states living in an anarchic international system in which they must fend for themselves and insecurity is a core driver of the more belligerent actions that states take in international politics, nuclear weapons should make states less inclined to compete for security, power, or allies or to engage in belligerent or aggressive foreign policies.[9] Thus, although the theory of the nuclear revolution primarily seeks to explain how nuclear-armed states should engage *with each other*, rather than how nuclear-armed states should behave more broadly, the theory does imply that nuclear-armed states should be generally more peaceful because nuclear weapons solve their core security needs. States with secure second-strike capabilities simply do not need to engage in provocative or belligerent behavior to secure territory, resources, or alliances or improve the conventional balance of power. For

advocates of the nuclear revolution, for example, nuclear weapons "provide [states] with security and reduce their incentives to wage war in the quest for security."[10] They "should allow the super-powers to take a more relaxed attitude toward events in third areas, including the [nonnuclear] third world," meaning that "it makes less sense to fight to control or destroy bases, territory, or military or economic resources."[11] Similarly, states with secure second-strike capabilities should not worry about competing for allies: "In the nuclear era, security is provided by second-strike capability; defections by allies are therefore less damaging," or, more bluntly, "nuclear weapons make alliances obsolete."[12]

Ultimately, the powerful conclusion of the theory of the nuclear revolution is that a nuclear-armed world is safer and more peaceful than one in which conventionally armed states must compete for security at every turn: nuclear weapons reduce or even "eliminate the security dilemma" that drives distrust among states seeking only to defend themselves;[13] "reduce the extent of the gains one can seek" in international politics;[14] make the status quo "relatively easy to maintain";[15] reduce the importance of the conventional military balance and the incentives for arms races;[16] "clear the fog of war" and "lower false optimism" about the outcomes of wars, thus reducing the possibility of miscalculation;[17] and "make states more cautious."[18]

Although it offers a powerful explanation for the absence of great power war in the nuclear era, the theory of the nuclear revolution does not get us very far in explaining how states change their foreign policies when they acquire nuclear weapons. Most importantly, the theory makes a single, powerful prediction, and it therefore implies that nuclear weapons should have the same effect on all states that possess them. However, as discussed above, when we look at the historical record, there is considerable variation in how states have changed their foreign policies after acquiring nuclear weapons. The theory of the nuclear revolution cannot explain this variation. Further, even advocates of this theory acknowledge that states have often not behaved according to its prescriptions. Robert Jervis, for example, describes US nuclear strategy as "illogical" because it "seeks to repeal the nuclear revolution rather than coming to grips with [it]," while Charles Glaser and Steve Fetter argue that US Cold War nuclear strategy "diverg[ed] significantly from the policies implied by the powerful logic of the nuclear revolution."[19]

Other theories also fail to explain the variation we see in the historical record for a different reason: they focus on explaining a single foreign policy behavior that nuclear weapons can facilitate. In particular, scholars have examined when nuclear acquisition leads to conventional military aggression. Most prominently, S. Paul Kapur argues that conventional aggression should be expected when conventionally weak states with revisionist preferences acquire nuclear weapons, because nuclear weapons provide a shield behind which revisionist states can pursue long-held territorial or other am-

bitions with limited fear of retaliation.[20] This work, although of great importance, focuses only on explaining aggression and therefore does not offer a full explanation of how nuclear acquisition affects a state's foreign policies. For example, Kapur does not make an explicit argument about the outcomes we should observe when conventionally powerful or status quo states acquire nuclear weapons, or whether weak, revisionist states will use nuclear weapons only to facilitate aggression.

Neither the theory of the nuclear revolution nor theories that explain when states use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression can explain the full variation we see in the historical record. The divergent ways in which states have used nuclear weapons to facilitate different foreign policy goals remain in need of an explanation.

The Argument

This book argues that nuclear weapons can facilitate a broad range of foreign policy behaviors that states may find attractive, and specifies when states are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of these behaviors.

What are the foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons can facilitate? First, nuclear weapons can facilitate *aggression*: the more belligerent pursuit of goals in preexisting disputes or in pursuit of previously defined interests. Second, nuclear weapons can facilitate *expansion*: the *widening* of a state's goals in international politics (including the initiation of new alliance relationships or new adversarial relationships). Third, nuclear weapons can facilitate *independence*: taking actions that an ally opposes or does not support. Fourth, nuclear weapons may facilitate *bolstering*: taking actions to increase the strength of an alliance, alliance partner, or friend. Fifth, nuclear weapons can facilitate *steadfastness*: a reduced inclination to back down in disputes or in response to coercion, and an increased willingness to defend the status quo. Finally, nuclear weapons can facilitate *compromise*: accepting less in preexisting disputes. These behaviors are not mutually exclusive: a state may engage in different combinations of these behaviors and may direct distinct foreign policy behaviors toward different states. And while some behaviors do not fit easily into these categories, they provide a useful starting point to begin thinking about the varying ways that nuclear weapons can affect the foreign policies of the states that acquire them.

While nuclear weapons can facilitate each of these behaviors, different states use nuclear weapons to facilitate different combinations of these behaviors. I offer a theory that helps explain this variation: the theory of "nuclear opportunism."[21] I argue that states exist in different strategic circumstances and therefore have different political priorities. These different priorities make different behaviors more or less attractive to each state. As a

result, states use nuclear weapons to facilitate different foreign policy behaviors after acquisition. For example, some states may use nuclear acquisition to facilitate aggression, while others may use nuclear weapons to bolster allies or pursue independence from an ally. According to the theory, states use nuclear weapons in an opportunistic way to improve their position in international politics and to help them achieve political goals that the state cares about. And it is the strategic situation or circumstances in which a state finds itself that determine the particular goals and behaviors a state will find attractive. Nuclear weapons, therefore, allow states to pursue their preexisting political goals with greater freedom.

The theory, shown in figure 0.1, is structured as a "decision tree" of three factors that describe the state's position in the international system and shed light on its political priorities: first, the existence of serious territorial threats or an ongoing war; second, the existence of a senior ally that provides for the state's security; third, whether a state is increasing or decreasing in relative power. This is not to suggest that other factors are of no importance—any theory is necessarily a simplification of a more complex reality. However, a simple theory makes testing the theory easier and provides a foundation that future work can build on.

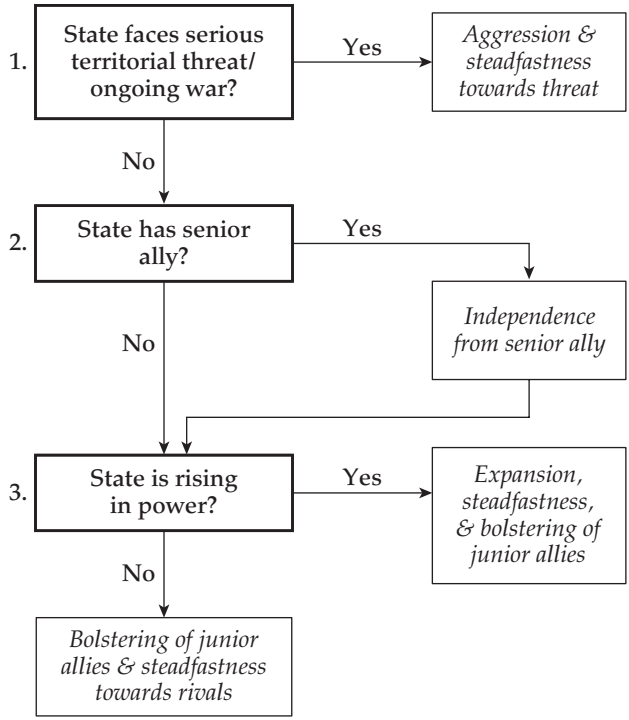

Figure 0.1. The theory of nuclear opportunism

The first variable in the tree is whether the state faces severe territorial threats or is engaged in an ongoing war. This variable comes first because it represents the most binding security environment a state can face. States in this position have little room to maneuver: their political priority must be to improve their position against the source of the threat or in the war they are engaged in, and they are likely to try to use nuclear weapons for this purpose. As a result, such states tend to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness—two behaviors that directly improve the state's position against its adversary.

For states not facing such threats, their geopolitical environment grants them greater latitude. Such states are not forced to use their nuclear weapons exclusively to improve their position vis-à-vis a primary threat and can afford to use nuclear weapons to improve their position in other ways. The second variable is whether the state has a senior ally that provides for its security. For states in this position, reducing their dependence on the senior ally is desirable, and their relative security allows them to do so. These states are likely to use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence from their senior ally.

The third variable—whether the state is rising in power—conditions the additional ways in which states in permissive security environments are likely to change their foreign policies after acquiring nuclear weapons. Secure, rising states often look to expand their influence in international politics, and so using nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion will therefore be attractive. Using nuclear weapons to stand more firmly in defense of the status quo and to bolster the state's existing allies are also likely to be attractive, as the state seeks to widen its ability to project power and influence. For states that are secure but not rising in power, expansion is less attractive. Indeed, even holding on to what the state already has may be challenging for declining states. However, nuclear weapons can help states in this position by facilitating the bolstering of allies and steadfastness in the face of challenges.

The theory of nuclear opportunism offers a different vision of nuclear weapons from that of the theory of the nuclear revolution. In particular, it makes a different judgment about how states respond to the security that nuclear weapons provide. Nuclear weapons do not cause states to worry less about their own security, reduce states' inclination to compete with each other, or cause states to stop trying to improve their position in international politics. Instead, states use nuclear weapons in service of their preexisting political goals and find nuclear weapons useful in pursuit of those goals. Nuclear weapons, in short, do not transform state preferences or international politics. Instead, they are incorporated into the practice of international politics.

To test the theory, I examine three cases: the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the United States. Each case represents a hard test for the theory and offers direct evidence about the process and mechanisms through which nuclear weapons affected each state's foreign policy. I look for changes in foreign policy behavior that occur at the point of nuclear acquisition, and then

try to assess whether nuclear weapons caused the changes observed. Each case study relies on evidence drawn from multiple archives, and the South African case also draws on interviews with retired military and political elites. In each case, I test the theory both on its own merits and against alternative explanations.

Britain faced no serious territorial threats, had a senior ally that provided for its security (the United States), and was declining in relative power. As the theory of nuclear opportunism would suggest, Britain did not use its nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, expansion, or compromise. Instead, Britain's political priorities were to maintain its position in the world and reduce its dependence on the United States. Britain, therefore, used nuclear weapons to bolster existing junior allies in Asia, the Middle East, and in Europe. Britain also became more comfortable responding more steadfastly to challenges to its position, and paying less attention to the preferences of the United States (that is, acting more independently) in doing so.

Similarly, I argue that South Africa's foreign policy changed in ways that are largely consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism. When it acquired nuclear weapons in the late 1970s, apartheid South Africa was engaged in a war in Angola and faced potential Soviet intervention, further Cuban intervention, and Angolan forces that threatened South African territory and amplified the internal threats the regime faced. South Africa's political priority was to improve its position in the conflict, and it used nuclear weapons to become more aggressive. Nuclear weapons facilitated this behavior by giving South Africa an extra source of leverage to prevent Soviet intervention in the conflict and thus reduced the risks of engaging in aggression.

The theory of nuclear opportunism also performs well in explaining US behavior. Nuclear acquisition affected US foreign policy very differently during World War II and in its aftermath. Fighting a brutal war in Europe and the Pacific when it initiated the Manhattan Project to acquire nuclear weapons, the United States first used nuclear weapons to engage in direct aggression against the Japanese, as would be expected. However, there are also ways in which US nuclear weapons facilitated compromise and independence from the Soviet Union during the final days of the war, which diverge from the expectations of the theory. In the aftermath of World War II, the situation facing the United States changed significantly: the United States no longer faced serious threats and was rising in power. The complexity of the immediate postwar world makes evaluating the predictions of the theory challenging. Nonetheless, I argue that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate the bolstering of allies, as well as behaviors that combined elements of steadfastness, expansion, and aggression.

Overall, while the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly, it offers important insights into the way in which states change their foreign policy when they acquire nuclear weapons, and outperforms existing explanations.