CHAPTER 3

Apartheid and Aggression

South Africa, Angola, and the Bomb

In late 1979, the apartheid South African regime secretly acquired nuclear weapons. A pariah state that excluded the majority of its population from political power, the South African regime faced internal unrest and an increasingly dangerous regional environment. South Africa was surrounded by states eager to see the downfall of the apartheid regime and was fighting an increasingly bloody war in Angola against a potent combination of Angolan and Cuban forces backed by Soviet arms and materiel. Despite these threats, South Africa never publicly tested its nuclear weapons or announced its nuclear capabilities to the world. Some twenty years later, South Africa dismantled its nuclear arsenal—again, in complete secrecy—as a prelude to domestic political reforms and rejoining the international community as a "rainbow nation." It remains the only state to have built nuclear weapons and voluntarily given them up. Based on interviews with members of the political and military elites of the apartheid regime, as well as declassified documents from South African government archives, this chapter examines South Africa's unique nuclear history and the ways in which nuclear weapons affected South African foreign policy.

South African elites from the apartheid regime are often eager to deny that any strategic rationale existed for their nuclear weapons program. According to this narrative, nuclear weapons were of no use to South Africa and had no effect on its foreign policy. For example, David Steward, a former ambassador to the United Nations, head of the Bureau for Information, and chief of staff to President F. W. de Klerk, argues that "the whole idea" that South Africa could have achieved political leverage using its nuclear weapons was "completely cock-eyed" and "the acquisition of nuclear weapons made very little sense at all."[1] Deon Fourie, a consultant to the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the apartheid era and a staff member at the South African Defence College who taught nuclear strategy in the 1970s and 1980s, claims that the entire nuclear program was based on "haywire think-

ing" by "politicians and soldiers at the top [who] were so unsophisticated politically."[2] This narrative appears plausible. After all, what use would a country fighting guerrillas in a bush war and that had conventional military superiority over all its neighbors have for nuclear weapons?

This narrative, however, is wrong. In fact, for all the paranoia, racism, and nationalism that motivated the apartheid regime, the South African nuclear program was underpinned by a steely strategic logic that South African elites were fully aware of and that affected South Africa's foreign policy in important ways. Perceiving existential threats from both inside and outside South Africa's borders, and fighting a war in Angola with the potential to trigger greater Soviet intervention that could overturn South Africa's military dominance, South African elites viewed nuclear weapons as the ultimate tool for deterring and controlling escalation. If South Africa's security situation were to worsen sufficiently, nuclear weapons provided South Africa with additional leverage to compel assistance from the United States and deter greater Soviet intervention in the region. This, in turn, reduced the risk of acting more aggressively in Angola, something the apartheid regime had long desired. As a result, and much as the theory of nuclear opportunism expects, South Africa became more aggressive in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons.

The South African case provides significant leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. As with the British case, the South African case is a hard one for the theory because it contains strong "countervailing conditions": factors that would lead us to expect that nuclear acquisition would have a relatively limited effect on foreign policy. South Africa had conventional military superiority over its neighbors, never announced its nuclear capabilities or built a large nuclear arsenal, and had status quo preferences: seeking to hold on to its position in southern Africa and maintain the institutions of apartheid in the face of international and domestic pressure. South Africa also developed nuclear weapons well after the emergence of the norm of nuclear nonuse, which should have made South African nuclear weapons even less relevant to its foreign policy. All of these factors would suggest that nuclear weapons would be relatively unlikely to affect South African foreign policy. The case of South Africa thus represents a hard case for the theory of nuclear opportunism, which predicts that nuclear weapons would have a significant effect on South Africa's foreign policy.

When Did South Africa Acquire Nuclear Weapons?

To look for changes in South African foreign policy caused by nuclear weapons, we first need to know when to look. When did South Africa acquire the relevant capabilities, and when should we expect to see changes occur in South African foreign policy? As discussed in chapter 1, this requires that

we pay attention to South Africa's nuclear posture, the ways in which South Africa intended to use nuclear weapons, and the particular technological and military capabilities that such uses require. This enables us to accurately identify the appropriate point in time at which to look for changes in foreign policy.

South Africa adopted a nuclear posture that aimed to threaten a nuclear test as a way to "draw in Western—particularly American—assistance," what Vipin Narang refers to as a "catalytic posture."[3] Most scholars of South Africa's nuclear program agree that this was the way South Africa intended to use its nuclear weapons.[4] This is confirmed by interviews with officials involved in the nuclear program and South African military and political decision making at the time.[5] As former South African ambassador to the UN Jeremy Shearar describes the logic of the strategy, "The thinking was that if the West knew we were going to test, they would want to stop us and they would then pledge support to South Africa."[6] Exactly what conflict threshold would have triggered South Africa to begin implementing the strategy remains unclear, although several members of the South African political and military elite suggested that Cuban or Angolan forces crossing into Namibia (then known as South West Africa, which South Africa controlled and ran as its own territory) would have been sufficient.[7]

The technological capabilities needed to use nuclear weapons in this way are modest. A state does not require the ability to deliver nuclear weapons with reliability, nor does it require a large or sophisticated arsenal.[8] All that is needed for nuclear weapons to affect the policy calculations of a state employing this posture is the ability to conduct a nuclear test: requiring only a crude explosive device and sufficient fissile material to sustain a chain reaction.

South Africa attained this capability in late 1979. André Buys, the future chair of the working group on nuclear strategy within Armscor (the state's arms production agency), recalls that the South Africans had initially thought they would have sufficient highly enriched uranium (HEU) to conduct a nuclear test in 1977. However, progress in producing HEU was slower than expected, and South Africa "only had sufficient material for the first explosion in 1979."[9] By this point, South Africa had already constructed a device with which to conduct an explosion.[10] The factor constraining South Africa's ability to test was therefore HEU, rather than a device with which to explode the fissile material.[11] In Buys's words, "The design was ready, everything was built, we were just waiting for a sufficient quantity of enriched uranium."[12] Although South African plans to conduct a cold test in 1977 had been thwarted by the Soviet discovery of the intended test facility that the South Africans had built in the Kalahari Desert, South African engineers were nonetheless highly confident that the device would work. Buys recalls that "I was convinced [that a cold test was not necessary]. The Little Boy weapon that was used on Hiroshima was never tested, so why would we

have to test?"[13] Waldo Stumpf, the head of the South African Atomic Energy Corporation at the time the program was dismantled, confirms that the cancellation of the cold test did "not really" affect South African calculations about whether the device would work, because the device was relatively simple and South African scientists had already "done a lot of other tests—firing one half of the projectile into the other half, criticality tests, etc."[14] From late 1979, South Africa had a device that could be tested within "a few days" of an order being given, and senior political leaders were aware that South Africa had attained this capability.[15] South Africa gained more sophisticated nuclear weapons in the early 1980s, with a ballistic bomb that could be delivered by aircraft in 1982 and glide bombs beginning in 1983.[16] South Africa also began exploring more advanced delivery systems that would have provided South Africa with a more sophisticated nuclear arsenal, including developing plans to deliver nuclear weapons using ballistic missiles and artillery guns.[17] Nonetheless, South Africa acquired the basic capabilities required for its nuclear posture in late 1979. As a result, it is in late 1979 that we should expect nuclear weapons would begin to affect South African foreign policy.

South Africa's Strategic Environment

What effects should we expect that nuclear weapons would have on South African foreign policy? The theory of nuclear opportunism requires us to examine South Africa's strategic environment in order to make predictions about how nuclear weapons would change South African foreign policy.

The first factor to examine is whether South Africa faced severe territorial threats or was involved in an ongoing war. This is straightforward because in 1979 South Africa was involved in a serious ongoing war in Angola. At the point at which South Africa acquired nuclear weapons, it had already conducted a major invasion of Angola in 1975 (Operation Savannah) that had been a tactical success but a strategic disaster that left South Africa diplomatically isolated.[18] In addition, numerous smaller raids inside Angola had been conducted with the aim of destroying South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) camps and supporting South Africa's proxy in Angola, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). This conflict, known as the Border War, would last until the end of the Cold War.

The war in Angola was only one component of a regional environment (shown in figure 3.1) that had been worsening for South Africa since the 1960s as the African continent experienced widespread decolonization.[19] Reflecting these concerns, South Africa's defense budget increased sixfold between 1961 and 1968.[20] Nonetheless, the immediate threats that South Africa faced remained manageable until the mid-1970s. South Africa (and South

Figure 3.1. Southern Africa

West Africa, which South Africa controlled) was bordered by Portuguese colonies that did not threaten its discriminatory domestic political institutions and were controlled by tens of thousands of Portuguese forces. These "frontline" states provided a buffer against the forces of nationalism, socialism, and black political liberation that worried white South African elites.[21] The colonies of Angola and Mozambique had been an important component of South Africa's forward defense, and the Portuguese government had allowed South Africa to conduct operations against SWAPO forces in southern Angola.[22] The white-minority government in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) led by Ian Smith provided an additional sympathetic neighbor.

In the mid-1970s, however, South Africa's security environment dramatically worsened. In particular, the 1974 military coup in Portugal upended South Africa's security environment and removed the *cordon sanitaire* be-

tween South Africa and the black majority governments to its north.[23] The new ruling junta in Lisbon granted independence to Mozambique and Angola in 1975, and informed the South Africans that they were no longer allowed to operate inside Angolan territory.[24] Further, in 1979, Ian Smith lost power in Rhodesia to Robert Mugabe.[25] These states now offered safe haven to insurgents seeking the independence of South West Africa (notably, SWAPO) and the dismantlement of apartheid within South Africa. Simultaneously, increasing racial tensions (most dramatically demonstrated in the 1976 Soweto riots), acts of sabotage, and international condemnation of South Africa's internal politics threatened South Africa's stability and the viability of the apartheid regime.

South Africa's new neighbors were hostile to the apartheid government, supportive of the African National Congress (ANC; the banned anti-apartheid party), and enjoyed close relations with the Soviet bloc. By late 1975, Soviet military planes had begun to transfer substantial numbers of Cuban military personnel and Soviet materiel and advisers to Angola.[26] As increasingly large numbers of Cuban forces and Soviet military equipment and advisers began to enter southern Africa, South African elites perceived a far more dangerous security environment. As Waldo Stumpf writes, "During the 1970s, especially the latter half of the decade, the political and military environment around South Africa deteriorated markedly. . . . The large buildup of Cuban military forces in Angola, beginning in 1975, which eventually peaked at 50,000 troops, reinforced a strong perception within the government that it would remain internationally isolated."[27] Victor Zazeraj, a South African ambassador and private assistant to Foreign Minister Pik Botha during the 1980s, recalls that the situation in southern Africa in the aftermath of the Portuguese coup was "perceived and experienced as an existential crisis . . . whereby the country's future existence, as we understood it, was under threat. . . . We had this [hostile] arc across Southern Africa that separated us from the rest of Africa."[28] Deon Fourie remembers that "everybody was shaken rigid [by Cuban and Soviet buildups]."[29]

There was little doubt among South African elites about the hostility of Soviet and Cuban intentions. South African elites perceived that Soviet goals in the region were ambitious and included the overthrow of the apartheid regime. David Steward recalls that "we believed that we were facing an existential crisis and we were extremely worried about the incursion of the Soviet Union into Southern Africa because . . . Southern Africa was a particularly significant target for the Soviet Union. . . . They wanted the SACP [South African Communist Party] to take over."[30] Colonel Jan Breytenbach, who commanded covert operations inside Angola, bluntly states: "When outside powers come to Africa, they don't come here to enjoy a holiday. They come here to expand their influence."[31] Defence Minister Magnus Malan writes in his memoirs that the Soviet goal was "helping the communists to conquer South Africa," and in private he would regularly use a quotation

attributed to Leonid Brezhnev: "Our goal is to get control over the two great treasuries on which the West depend—the energy treasury of the Persian Gulf and the mineral treasury of Central and Southern Africa."[32] Similarly, Major General Jannie Geldenhuys, chief of the South African Defence Force from 1985 to 1990, poses a rhetorical question in assessing the motivations of Cuba and the Soviet Union: What "did South Africa have to do with the situation in Angola during the 1970s and 1980s? Obviously, any decent person would ask the much more valid question: What did the island of Cuba and the Soviet Union have to do with Angola?"[33]

The threat that South African elites perceived was not simply the direct military threat then posed by South Africa's neighbors. After all, the SADF had training and equipment superior to that of the opponents it faced in Angola, including the Cuban forces.[34] However, the fear among South African elites was that the Soviet Union had the resources to quickly escalate the conflict with large numbers of forces and advanced equipment that South Africa would have no ability to counter. Thus, while South Africa maintained military superiority over the threats it faced, its superiority was vulnerable to being swiftly overturned. South African elites thus had much to fear. As David Steward recalls, "Even though we were confronted with fairly sophisticated forces in Southern Angola, we never really felt that we were not capable of dealing with them, and we were proved to be right. . . . [But] we were worried that there might be further troops, further Russian troops, further intervention, that would then affect our conventional superiority."[35] Furthermore, South Africa's other neighbors (such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique) posed no offensive military threat but could nonetheless provide a safe haven for the ANC and its military wing Umkhonte we Sizwe (MK), from which it could launch sabotage and terrorist attacks within South Africa. As Major General Gert Opperman, who commanded operations in Angola and served as military secretary to Defence Minister Malan, argues, "We never anticipated that there would be any incursion from Botswana or Zimbabwe or Mozambique of their own forces onto our territories. But they could provide the umbrella under which the ANC could launch incursions. Not armed incursions in the combat sense, but infiltrations—[they would be able to] get through to our infrastructure [and commit acts of sabotage and terrorism]."[36] This combination of the *swart gevaar* (black threat) and the *rooi gevaar* (red threat) thus became the core problem that apartheid South African foreign policy sought to address.

Thus, while apartheid South Africa possessed substantial conventional military power, the threats it faced were significant. South Africa had a large border to defend, could draw on only a small percentage of its population to meet any potential combination of internal and external threats, and faced states whose combined population was far larger than South Africa's and that had a superpower patron with the ability to provide military forces and capabilities that South Africa would be unable to match.[37] This threat was

articulated in the apocalyptic concept of "total onslaught" that entered the South African strategic lexicon as early as 1973, and the putative South African solution in the concept of "total strategy" that saw a "reorientation towards a 'landward threat' and away from the traditional role of South Africa as a strategic partner of the West in protecting the sea-lanes around the southern point of Africa."[38]

South Africa was therefore both involved in an ongoing war and faced severe territorial threats when it acquired nuclear weapons. As I discuss in more detail below, the theory of nuclear opportunism predicts that South Africa's political priority should have been to improve its position against the threats it faced and that South African elites should have sought to use their nuclear capability to pursue these goals.

Expectations

The predictions of the theory of nuclear opportunism are straightforward in this case, because South Africa was involved in an ongoing war and faced severe territorial threats when it acquired nuclear weapons. Figure 3.2 shows the application of the theory of nuclear opportunism to the case of South Africa. Both aggression (the more belligerent pursuit of preexisting interests) and steadfastness (standing more firmly in defense of the status quo) against the source of the threats it faced should have been attractive foreign policy behaviors for South Africa. The theory therefore anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate both aggression and steadfastness.

Because of the political priority that states facing severe threats or involved in ongoing wars must place on improving their position against the source of the threat, the first variable in the sequence is the only one that matters for the predictions made in the case of South Africa. Aggression and steadfastness are the behaviors that such states should be expected to find most attractive. States facing severe threats, for example, do not have the luxury of pursuing independence (defined as taking actions that allies oppose or do not support), because states in this position require support from anywhere they can get it. As a result, we would not expect that using nuclear weapons to facilitate independence would be an attractive option for South Africa. Similarly, states facing severe threats must improve their own security before they can begin to think about improving the security of others. Using nuclear weapons to facilitate bolstering—strengthening allies or alliances—is therefore an unattractive proposition for states facing severe threats. Considering the scale of the challenges and threats the state already faces, engaging in expansion—the widening of a state's interests in international politics—is also unappealing. Last, while responding to the additional security provided by nuclear weapons by showing an increased inclination to compromise—the acceptance of less in ongoing disputes—might be

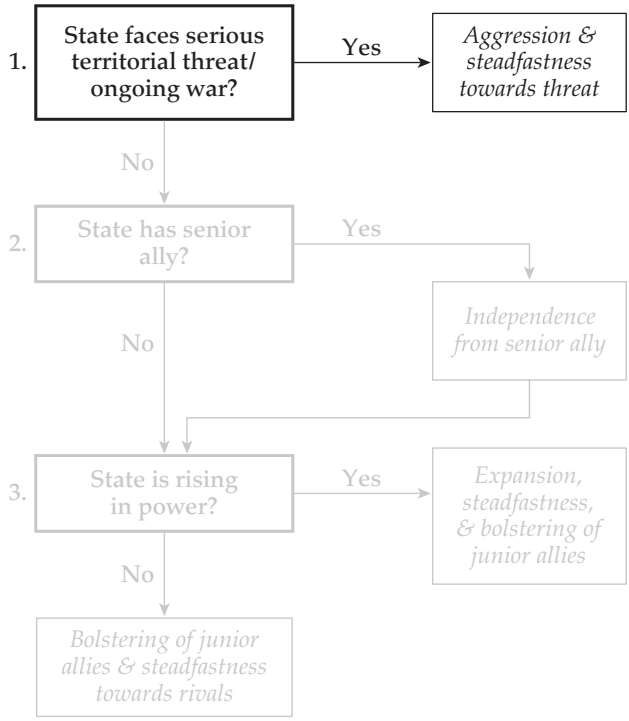

Figure 3.2. The theory of nuclear opportunism applied to South Africa, 1979

predicted by the theory of the nuclear revolution, it is not predicted by the theory of nuclear opportunism. Nuclear opportunism anticipates that states seek to use their nuclear weapons to try to improve their position in international politics, rather than to make concessions that they previously deemed unacceptable. The theory of nuclear opportunism, therefore, does not predict that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise.

The theory of nuclear opportunism therefore suggests that South Africa should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness but should not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence, bolstering, expansion, or compromise in the aftermath of acquiring a testable nuclear device in late 1979. In addition to predictions about South African behavior, we can also make predictions about how South African elites should have thought about nuclear weapons and the benefits that nuclear weapons offered. The theory predicts that South African elites would view nuclear weapons as useful tools for advancing their interests and improving their position relative to the sources of threats that they faced, and more specifically, for facilitating aggression and steadfastness against those threats.

South African Thinking about Nuclear Weapons

This section examines South African elite thinking about the utility of nuclear weapons. Did South Africa view nuclear weapons as a useful tool for improving its position against the threats it faced? Did it think about nuclear weapons as a way of facilitating aggression and steadfastness, and if so, how?

In examining this question, there are limits to the certainty of conclusions we should expect to draw. First, only a small group of South African elites actually knew about the nuclear program. Second, the renunciation of South Africa's nuclear program and the strategic rationale behind it, and South Africa's subsequent commitment to nonproliferation, were a core part of South Africa's efforts to rejoin the international community in the early 1990s. As a result, and as discussed earlier, South African officials are often reluctant to acknowledge that South Africa's nuclear weapons had any strategic value at all. Third, many documents from the apartheid regime relating to the nuclear program were either destroyed or remain classified.[39]

Nonetheless, from the statements of military and political elites one can piece together a coherent strategic rationale for South African nuclear weapons that is consistent with the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism. First, South African foreign policy and conduct in the Border War were heavily constrained by the need to avoid triggering potential escalation, and, in particular, to reduce the risk of further Soviet intervention that might overturn South Africa's conventional military advantage. In short, South African elites wanted to act more aggressively in Angola but were deterred from doing so by the risk of escalation. Second, nuclear weapons would be helpful in solving this problem by reducing the risk of such escalation. The logical implication of these two beliefs is that by reducing the risk of escalation, nuclear weapons reduced the risk associated with South African aggression.

First, there is little question that South African elites wanted to act more aggressively in Angola, but were restrained from doing so by fears of Cuban and, especially, Soviet escalation. Furthermore, those actions that South Africa did take were constrained in various ways by the need to reduce the risks of escalation and to avoid triggering further Soviet intervention.

Apartheid-era South African elites are consistent that fears about conflict escalation were a major constraint on South African behavior throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and those fears of escalation frequently prevented South African aggression. The fear was primarily due to the Soviet Union, which had the ability to flood the conflicts on South Africa's borders with advanced equipment and further forces. As Major General Johann Dippenaar remembers, "Right from the beginning we were aware that there were Russian advisors and Cuban advisors, we realized that advisors could escalate to forces."[40] As a result, South Africa consistently sought to avoid giving the

Soviet Union any excuse to escalate the conflict. As Major General Opperman recalls: "Right throughout the war there was an element of restraint . . . the types of weaponry used; the sort of targets engaged . . . would it result in unnecessary escalation?"[41] Major General Roland de Vries, who commanded operations in Angola, argues similarly that "it had to be played very carefully because the conflict could have developed into a regional war."[42] Dippenaar recalls that "politics put a lot of restrictions on all operations . . . so there was a constant caution."[43] These constraints affected South African conduct of the Border War in a number of ways. Concerns about escalation did not always prevent South Africa from taking military actions, but the fear of escalation by the Soviet Union was a constant constraint. As one 1981 Department of Foreign Affairs memo stated with respect to covert South African operations in Mozambique, "It must be borne in mind that every attack upon the ANC will be interpreted as an attack on Mocambique sovereignty and thus provide a pretext for Russia to sink her bear-claws deeper into that state. This should not stop us from raiding ANC bases in the future, but such action should be carefully considered in the light of its potential for escalating the Russian presence in Mocambique."[44]

These fears not only constrained South African choices about which operations to conduct, but also constrained South African goals within individual operations. For example, South Africa sought to restrict the geographical zones in which it operated to reduce the fears of escalation. Major General Opperman recalls commanding "an operation 250 kilometers deep inside Zambia [in which] I was forced to withdraw overnight, although at that stage we had not yet achieved all the things that we wanted to achieve militarily. In fact, I would have liked to stay there for another week or two, but we were told to withdraw overnight. . . . Instead of continuing and doing what you believed had to be done from a military point of view, you had to withdraw. . . . One of the constant factors to be considered was: would it result in unnecessary escalation of the war?"[45] Colonel Breytenbach confirms that although South Africa had the capacity to hold significant territory, it did not, for fear of escalation, arguing that "we could have taken over the Cunene Province, for instance—we used to go in there quite often to go sort out SWAPO. So we could have gone in there with three battalions and keep them there, but then of course the Russians would come back *en masse*," escalating the conflict.[46] Major General de Vries recalls similar constraints: "There were constraints . . . in terms of how far you could go. Can you attack Menongue? No. Can we attack Cuito Cuanavale from the west? No. Rather, stay on the eastern side of the river so that the war does not escalate."[47] These constraints hampered South Africa's ability to achieve tactical military goals. Major General Opperman recalls that visiting US commanders "could not understand how we could accept a situation where the ground of tactical importance on the other side of the river was in the hands of the Zambian forces. They suggested we take over and control that ground,

because in the process we would have greater security. But I said, 'No, I have to live with that risk.' If I take over that ground, it might make sense from a military point of view, a tactical point of view, but from a strategic point of view that would be exactly the type of escalation that we would like to prevent."[48]

South Africa also conducted its operations in ways that aimed to minimize the threat of escalation. In many cases, this meant secrecy. In Operation Savannah, Major General Opperman recalls that "our government had hoped that by going in covertly, we would prevent the situation from escalating much more rapidly."[49] South African forces "had the capability" to take the Angolan capital Luanda in that operation, but restrained themselves in large part out of fears of the escalation that overtly capturing the capital city would trigger.[50] Ambassador Shearar confirms that going to Luanda "would have opened the door for anyone else to come in," and recalls that this concern was expressed explicitly by the foreign minister at the prime minister's residence.[51] In other cases, the desire to control escalation meant ensuring that exit routes existed for South African advisers to other participants in the Angolan war. As an adviser to both the National Front for the Liberation of Angola and UNITA, Colonel Breytenbach recalls that "the first thing you get sorted out is your escape route to get out. . . . You must be able to get away quickly. . . . When things start getting wrong, then you must get out. . . . You always have a standby plane or vehicle or something that you can get into and be gone."[52] The South African government also sought to control information in the public domain about South African activities in Angola, restricting reports published in South African media outlets, and seeking to discredit those appearing in foreign sources as "Communist propaganda."[53]

Targeting was also carefully calibrated in order to minimize the threat of escalation. In particular, the South Africans sought to avoid direct conflict with Russian forces in order to avoid triggering deeper Soviet involvement in the region. As Ambassador Victor Zazeraj recalls, "Very often there were Russian pilots flying . . . at the same time as our pilots, who could hear them on the radio communications and knew the markings on the planes. There was an unspoken rule that if it was a Russian pilot or even a Cuban pilot, the South African Air Force wouldn't interfere with them too much. . . . You don't want to scratch the bear and create a problem that you can't solve. We would not have wanted to draw them in, or create a pretext that would allow them to do us more harm than we could cope with."[54] Indeed, Soviet forces may have intentionally facilitated this mutual restraint by separating themselves from the Angolan and Cuban forces. Ambassador Zazeraj noted that "the Russians were no worse at apartheid than we were. . . . Their officers were not living in the same camp as the rest of them [and] made sure you could see from the air which was their camp—they had big hammers and sickles on their tents." This enabled South African restraint: "Our Air

Force would be told not to hit the Russian camp. . . . You don't want to have a missile go in and upset them, because then you would have a crisis."[55]

The South African government also sought to centralize control over military operations. Some South African elites involved in decision making at the time claim that Pretoria exercised only weak control over what the SADF was doing in the field, and that many SADF operations were not officially sanctioned by Pretoria. David Steward, for example, argues that "very often [the SADF] didn't tell the Department of Foreign Affairs about their adventures."[56] Such claims must be evaluated with skepticism because of the incentive that members of the apartheid regime have to claim they lacked knowledge about, and did not authorize, specific operations. The weight of evidence, however, suggests exactly the opposite: that Pretoria exercised very tight control over individual operations and did so precisely because of concerns about escalation. As Major General Opperman recalls, "We never had carte blanche. We were always very aware . . . that the politicians were in charge."[57] Major General Dippenaar recalls that "every time before operations could take place, we had to have approval—and there was no chance you could have done anything without political approval from our side. And then all those approvals came out with very strict conditions: you can't be longer than this, you can't take more than that kind of vehicle [etc.]."[58] Colonel Breytenbach confirms that "every time we went across the border it was planned at the highest level, and there were Generals sitting there on this planning committee with the Minister of Defence," while Major General Geldenhuys writes that "a decision to cross the border was a political one for which the government and the Minister of Defence carried the responsibility."[59] Colonel Breytenbach recalls that new orders were given on a daily basis to keep commanders on the tightest possible leash, and individual commanders were often unaware of the ultimate goals of the missions they were undertaking.[60] While former military commanders may have an incentive to claim they were under strict orders so as to minimize their personal responsibility for the less savory activities that occurred during the Border War, some political elites also agreed that tight political control was exercised over military operations. Ambassador Zazeraj confirms that "control [by Pretoria] was very much the case—they really did not want the situation to get out of control. . . . The political elite was dead scared that something would create an international incident."[61] This micromanagement of operations by Pretoria caused tensions in civil-military relations. Major General de Vries recalls that "the high command started micromanaging the battlefront, which was highly infuriating for the commanders on the ground."[62] And officers who exceeded the bounds of their authority were punished. Major General Opperman recalls that "Colonel Jan Breytenbach—who was one of our best tactical commanders on the ground—he decided on his own to undertake patrols in Zimbabwe, and he was severely reprimanded because he was told that, 'your undisciplined

actions, your initiative, might make military sense, but it would escalate the war and we don't want that.'"[63]

Overall, the fear of escalation constrained South African aggression in the Border War in a number of ways: South Africa was cautious about the nature, scale, and scope of its operations in order to avoid provoking potential Soviet intervention. South African elites wanted to act more aggressively in Angola but were deterred from doing so by the fear of escalation.

Crucially, South African elites understood that nuclear weapons offered South Africa a solution to this problem. In particular, they allowed South Africa greater ability to control the risks associated with escalation. In examining South African thinking surrounding the utility of the nuclear program, it is important to note, as mentioned above, the limited number of people involved in discussions of South Africa's nuclear strategy. Very few officials even knew of the existence of the nuclear program, and there was little discussion of the nuclear program within the South African government. Thus, while many in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs were skeptical of the utility of nuclear weapons for a state like South Africa that never lost its conventional military advantage,[64] their views were marginalized within the South African decision-making process. After 1978, the State Security Council "replaced the cabinet as the dominant institution in the formulation of foreign policy."[65] The State Security Council was dominated by the more hawkish views of President P. W. Botha and Defence Minister Magnus Malan and was staffed primarily by military officers.[66] Major General Opperman, who served in the State Security Council as the military secretary to Defence Minister Malan, confirms that the views of President Botha and Defence Minister Malan "dominated the discussion" and that both believed that nuclear weapons served a "clear political purpose."[67] That political purpose was, in large part, to grant South Africa greater capacity to control the dangers of Soviet escalation. As early as 1977, a CIA assessment argued that "the [South African] rationale for going ahead in the development of nuclear weapons stems from a fear that ultimately South Africa faces the threat of being invaded by Communist-backed black regimes and perhaps even by Soviet and Cuban forces."[68] Similarly, in 1984, the CIA concluded that it was the "threat of a [Soviet] invasion of South Africa [that required] the added protection of a credible nuclear deterrent."[69] These external assessments are mirrored by the recollections of South African officials. As Major General Opperman recalls, "I think . . . the fear of [Soviet] escalation, from a nuclear point of view, was also very prominent [in the reasons for nuclear acquisition]."[70] In the words of Major General de Vries, the purpose of South African nuclear weapons was to create "a silent fear on the side of the Cubans and the Russians" to constrain their temptation to escalate the conflict.[71]

Indeed, the nuclear strategy that South Africa adopted—the so-called three stage strategy—was explicitly designed to provide multiple points within a

conflict at which nuclear weapons could influence the escalation calculations of opponents and allies.[72] According to André Buys, the strategy was "absolutely" aimed at improving South Africa's ability to deter and control escalation.[73] As described in an internal memo, the first stage of the strategy aimed to seek some deterrent effect from uncertainty: South Africa should pursue "a 'strategy of uncertainty' whereby a conflicting set of perceptions regarding SA's nuclear weapons capability is created. The greater the uncertainty created, the greater the deterrent effect of South Africa's presumed capability. Only once a situation is reached where the military threat against SA increases to a point where the conventional balance of power tilts against us, should consideration be given to moving into a posture of covert disclosure and eventual overt displays of strength."[74]

As described, the strategy was designed so that it would "go live" only if the conflict in Angola escalated to a point at which South African elites felt it threatened the survival of the state. Thus, South African nuclear weapons aimed to provide South Africa with more options should the conflict on South Africa's borders begin to escalate beyond Pretoria's control. As Major General Dippenaar described the purpose of South Africa's nuclear weapons, "Even if things go terribly wrong, there is some way of responding and reacting."[75] André Buys confirms that "the concern was that this [the Angolan conflict] would escalate to a point where we would not be able to curtail it. And so the question was then, what do we do then?"[76] Buys continues: "The first stage was that we would keep it secret, and for that, you don't need any physical hardware—the strategy of uncertainty, just keep them guessing. The second stage was that if the military threat escalates to the point where we want to start activating the deterrent strategy, we would tell the United States—you had Ronald Reagan as president, we had Margaret Thatcher in Britain, these were people our politicians could talk to and they could be informed: 'we've got this problem, but we've got nuclear weapons, so please try and intervene and get the pressure off.'"[77]

This is the catalytic nuclear posture that Narang and others identify.[78] At a particular conflict threshold—perhaps the invasion of South West Africa (Namibia) by large numbers of conventional forces—South Africa would have communicated to Washington its intention to conduct a nuclear test.[79] Indeed, Foreign Minister Pik Botha explicitly promised President Reagan that South Africa would not test a nuclear weapon without first informing Washington.[80] The purpose of such a threat would have been to use the American desire to avoid overt proliferation to persuade the United States to intervene—whether diplomatically to persuade the Soviet Union to restrain its own clients, or militarily by providing South Africa with conventional reinforcements: "It was a way of getting a reluctant party to become involved and stop this thing from getting out of hand."[81] South African officials were well aware that Washington was opposed to South Africa acquiring nuclear weapons,[82] and paid careful attention to US responses to other

proliferators, including India.[83] This led South African officials to believe that the United States may well be prepared to offer South Africa support—whether military or political—in order to prevent South Africa from becoming an overt nuclear power. At the very least, the ability to threaten to test a nuclear device would, in the words of a 1984 CIA assessment, "put the United States in an awkward position."[84]

However, South Africa's nuclear strategy included plans beyond mere threats of testing, because, in Buys's words, such threats "might not work. . . . If that [threatening to test] didn't work, the third strategy was then the open strategy—we would detonate one underground. If that brings sense to the military threat, if the threat is relieved, then OK. If it is not, the idea was that we would demonstrate a nuclear weapon. And what we had in mind was to actually go and do a mock attack with a nuclear weapon over the ocean—fly out and actually detonate a nuclear weapon a thousand kilometres south of South Africa in the ocean."[85] This basic strategy—which had been approved as early as April 1978—thus provided opportunities for South African elites to control escalation and deter further Soviet intervention at several points in a potential conventional conflict.[86] Indeed, South African officials considered adding a fourth stage to the strategy, which would have provided another point at which South Africa's nuclear capabilities could have been used to control escalation. As Buys describes, "There was a lot of discussion about whether we should add a fourth step or not—it was never officially added, but the debate was, if that [a test over the ocean] doesn't work and they still attack South Africa—do we actually use it tactically? It was never approved by the politicians and thank God we never got near that—but it was certainly discussed. . . . We said that there might be a need for a fourth stage to the strategy, but it was never approved, which would have entailed tactical use on troops when they crossed our borders."[87] Consistent with these ideas of tactical nuclear use, South Africa also toyed with designs for tactical nuclear weapons and alternative delivery systems including ballistic missiles and artillery guns, but such devices were never approved for construction.[88]

At the time, South African elites also made public but ambiguous threats that aimed to dissuade South African opponents from escalating the conflict. P. W. Botha, for example, gave a speech in 1979 in which he stated that "South Africa's enemies may possibly find out that we have military weapons they don't know about." A UN report noted that the South African interior minister stated that if South Africa were attacked, "we will use all means at our disposal, whatever they may be. It is true that we have just completed our own pilot plant that uses very advanced technology, and that we have major uranium reserves."[89] Other ministers also made public reference on other occasions to a "secret weapon."[90]

US analysts also believed South Africa's ambiguous nuclear status would affect its adversaries' calculations. A 1984 CIA assessment argued that South

Africa's nuclear posture granted it "a number of benefits, particularly for a pariah state such as South Africa. It forces Pretoria's adversaries to assume that South Africa has a weapons capability and to factor that assumption into their policy formation."[91] And, indeed, the ambiguous threat of nuclear escalation did in fact reduce the willingness of Cuban forces to take particular escalatory steps in Angola, thus easing the dangers associated with South African aggression. Ambassador Zazeraj recalls that "we only had confirmation [that the Cubans had changed their behavior out of fear of South African nuclear weapons] in 2010—we had a meeting with Jorge Risquet [Fidel Castro's point man on Africa] who confirmed that the Cubans in Angola were convinced that South Africa had nuclear warheads attached to its G5 and G6 artillery. And for that reason, Cuban troops never came anywhere near the Namibian border, and never came near the South Africans. They were also split up in different areas, so that if we did attack them with nuclear weapons, we wouldn't wipe all of them out."[92] Indeed, Fidel Castro himself acknowledged the role of nuclear weapons in constraining Cuban behavior, writing: "Our troops advanced at night . . . in groups of no more than 1,000 men, strongly armed, at a prescribed distance from one another, always keeping in mind the possibility that the enemy might use nuclear weapons."[93]

Overall, therefore, nuclear weapons were seen as providing South Africa with a tool that enabled it to deter escalation by its adversaries. Consistent with this aim, South African elites set up their nuclear strategy in a way that allowed them to attempt to control escalation at several different conflict thresholds within an escalating conflict. If nuclear weapons allow a state to better control escalation, they also reduce the risks associated with engaging in aggression. First, nuclear weapons can deter an opponent from escalating a conflict in response to aggression. Second, even if an act of aggression does lead to substantial escalation, or leads to a response from the adversary that the state is unprepared for, possessing nuclear weapons provides a state with additional options in responding to, and controlling, such a situation. As a result, nuclear weapons can reduce the expected costs of engaging in activities that risk such escalation, such as aggression.

Apartheid-era officials are, unsurprisingly, reluctant to state explicitly that they believed that nuclear weapons facilitated South African aggression. Nonetheless, a clear causal chain—with each stage verified by South African elites—links South African nuclear acquisition to an increase in South Africa's tolerance for escalation and ability to engage in aggression. Given that South African aggression was constrained by fears of escalation and that South African officials believed nuclear weapons helped them control escalation, the logical conclusion would be that nuclear weapons would facilitate South African aggression. And, indeed, at least some officials are prepared to make ambiguous statements that suggest nuclear weapons were not a purely defensive capability. Ambassador Victor Zazeraj states that "the

military felt that nuclear weapons had a purpose. The military thought that as long as their enemy believed that South Africa had nuclear weapons and acted accordingly, *it made their lives a whole lot easier*. In some ways I think they were right. . . . It did work."[94] A memo written in 1975 by the chief of the defense staff Lieutenant General Raymond Fullarton Armstrong argues nuclear weapons could serve as a "positive weapon in our defense."[95] That nuclear weapons might facilitate aggression was also understood by outside observers: a 1980 UN report concluded that South African nuclear weapons "could also help to support extended involvement and intervention elsewhere in the region," even if South Africa never revealed its capabilities and chose to "covertly stockpile weapons and rely . . . on unconfirmed but widely credited rumours that it had those weapons in order to further its purposes."[96]

Even if former South African officials are generally (and unsurprisingly) unwilling to confirm explicitly that they viewed nuclear weapons as a tool to facilitate aggression and steadfastness, one can piece together a causal chain that reinforces that conclusion. South African elites felt constrained by concerns about escalation *and* viewed nuclear weapons as a tool that could be used to deter and control escalation. Nuclear weapons may therefore have been seen as reducing the risks associated with both aggression and steadfastness. But if so, did South African behavior change as the theory expects? Did South African tolerance for escalation, and willingness to engage in behaviors that it had previously eschewed for fears of escalation, rise after acquiring nuclear weapons?

South African Foreign Policy

We are therefore able to trace a logic in how South African officials thought about nuclear weapons that seems consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism. However, did South Africa's foreign policy behavior change in the way that the theory suggests? The theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that South Africa should have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness after late 1979. I first examine South Africa's behavior in its primary ongoing conflict during the 1970s and 1980s to assess whether South African behavior changed at the point of nuclear acquisition. I then examine the other foreign policy behaviors in the typology. I look at South Africa's foreign policy with respect to its (few) allies to assess whether South Africa behaved more independently or sought to bolster allies to a greater degree in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition. Finally, I examine whether South Africa's ambitions in the region widened in a way that indicates South African expansion in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

Did South Africa become more aggressive in its conduct of the ongoing Border War in 1979, as the theory of nuclear opportunism would suggest?

Did South Africa defend its position more steadfastly? Or did South Africa become more willing to compromise after nuclear acquisition? This section examines South Africa's conduct in its most important ongoing conflict, the civil war in Angola, and the broader Border War. I assess whether in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South Africa became more willing to make compromises, whether South Africa pushed more aggressively in pursuit of its goals, and whether South Africa became more willing to fight to defend the status quo.

We can first examine how the macro-level patterns of conflict that South Africa was involved in changed over time. In the ten years preceding South African nuclear acquisition, South Africa was involved in an average of 1.25 MIDs per year. Consistent with the idea that South Africa behaved more aggressively in existing disputes, in the ten years following nuclear acquisition, the number of conflicts rose by 25 percent to 1.55 MIDs per year. Similarly, we can examine the military operations that South Africa undertook in Angola in the few years before and after acquiring nuclear weapons. As table 3.1 shows, in the three years before South Africa acquired nuclear weapons (1977, 1978, and 1979), it engaged in just three major military operations in Angola—Seiljag, Reindeer, and Rekstok—and (with the exception of a paratrooper raid at Cassinga as part of Operation Reindeer) kept its operations close to the Angolan border. In the three years after acquiring nuclear weapons (1980, 1981, and 1982), South Africa engaged in many more major military operations in Angola and became more comfortable conducting military operations deeper inside Angolan territory.

We can also examine South African conduct in individual operations in more detail. In the years preceding nuclear acquisition, South Africa was relatively cautious in the operations it undertook in Angola (with Operation Savannah providing a notable exception, which is discussed further below). South Africa generally conducted its operations covertly, staying close to the border between Angola and Namibia, and generally limited the manpower and heavy weaponry dedicated to them.

South African efforts to undermine the ongoing insurgency in South West Africa had been under way since the 1960s, but it was in 1974 that the SADF took over responsibility for counterinsurgency operations from the South African Police, just weeks before the coup d'état overthrowing Portugal's fascist dictatorship.[97] In the aftermath of the coup, South Africa could no longer rely on Portuguese forces to prevent SWAPO fighters from setting up bases within Angola from which to conduct raids inside South West Africa, and could no longer count on support in conducting anti-SWAPO patrols north of the border. For SWAPO, this provided an enormous benefit: SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma wrote that "it was as if a locked door had suddenly swung open," and SWAPO moved its headquarters to the Angolan capital of Luanda.[98] Within weeks, southern Angola and north South West Africa were "swarming with SWAPO armed bands."[99]

Table 3.1 South African military operations in Angola before and after nuclear acquisition

Three years before nuclear acquisition (1977, 1978, 1979)			
Operation	*Date*	*Location(s)*	*Distance to border (km)*
Seiljag	Feb. 1978	Yati Strip	14.0
Reindeer	May 1978	Chetequera	29.2
		Dombondola	6.5
		Cassinga	253.2
Rekstok	Mar. 1979	Oncocua	36.4
		Mongua	73.6
Three years after nuclear acquisition (1980, 1981, 1982)			
Operation	*Date*	*Location(s)*	*Distance to border (km)*
Sceptic	May 1980	Ionde	118.8
		Chifufua	180.0
		Chitumba	90.0
Vastrap	July 1980	Cuamato	35.0
Klipklop	July 1980	Chitado	5.0
Wishbone	Dec. 1980	Ongiva	33.8
		Xangongo	68.6
Konyn	Aug. 1981	Cahama	121.9
		Chibemba	154.5
Carnation	June 1981	Ongiva	33.8
Protea	Aug. 1981	Ongiva	33.8
		Xangongo	68.6
		Cahama	121.9
Daisy	Nov. 1981	Ionde	118.8
		Indungo	300.0
		Mupa	134.7
Mispel	Nov. 1981	Ongiva	33.8
Kerslig	Nov. 1981	Luanda	890.6
Makro	Dec. 1981	Ongiva	33.8
Super	Mar. 1982	Cambêno Valley	24.2
		Iona	33.3
Meebos I	Mar. 1982	Ongiva	33.8
		Evale	93.3
Meebos II	July 1982	Ongiva	33.8
		Xangongo	68.6
		Cassinga	253.2

Hawks in the SADF wanted to cross the Angolan border at this stage to "clobber SWAPO on the other side."[100] But South Africa held back, with Prime Minister John Vorster remaining particularly cautious. It was only when the United States and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) encouraged South Africa to take action to prevent the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from taking power in Luanda that South Africa undertook a significant military operation deep inside Angola, in Operation Savannah. The precise role that the United States played in encouraging South African action is disputed, and US records downplay the

US role.[101] Nonetheless, South African elites had no doubt that the United States had encouraged action. David Steward recalls that South Africa went into Angola "with the support of the United States," a claim confirmed by Major General Opperman, who argued that "one of the conditions of the American promises to become involved [was that] their role should not be [revealed]."[102] Ambassador Victor Zazeraj is adamant that South Africa went into Angola "at the request of the US" and that South Africa would not have considered doing so without American encouragement and the promise of American reinforcements, a suggestion that is backed up by the serious misgivings that many South African cabinet members (including the prime minister) held regarding the operation.[103]

Although US officials have sought to play down the American role, Chester Crocker, the Reagan administration's senior official working on southern Africa, acknowledges that "our winks and nods formed part of the calculus of Angola's neighbors."[104] Piero Gleijeses, a historian generally unsympathetic to the apartheid regime, confirms that Pretoria "might otherwise have hesitated" had it not been for American encouragement.[105] And, indeed, US officials made public statements that implied support for South African intervention. In a speech that the South African embassy forwarded to the secretary for foreign affairs, US secretary of state Henry Kissinger stated that "the forces in control of the capital city of Luanda achieved this position through a very substantial inflow of communist arms. . . . The United States does not feel that it will recognize the faction [the MPLA] that has . . . seized that capital city [of Luanda] by foreign assistance. . . . We would support any move that keeps outside powers out of Angola, and we would participate in such a move."[106]

South Africa's initial objectives in Operation Savannah were rather modest: to help UNITA reclaim territory it had previously controlled. Furthermore, South Africa hoped to accomplish these goals while maintaining the secrecy of its role, due to fears that an overt invasion would create significant escalation dynamics.[107] However, South Africa achieved tactical successes well beyond what was expected. Despite using mostly World War II–era equipment and materiel, South African forces achieved quick and dramatic advances, with a CIA operative describing it as "the most effective military strike force ever seen in black Africa, exploding through the MPLA/Cuban ranks in a blitzkrieg," and with one commander moving "more than 3,100km up a hostile coast in a mere 33 days of movement" for the loss of just one South African life.[108]

South African forces even ended up within striking distance of Luanda, although the cabinet was informed that several hundred casualties would likely result if South Africa attempted to take the Angolan capital.[109] But South Africa's efforts to maintain secrecy failed, and its intervention in Angola was widely reported around the world. More importantly, the escalation that South Africa feared transpired: within weeks, thirty-six thousand

Cuban troops and three hundred tanks had arrived on Angolan territory, making further advances increasingly challenging for South African forces.[110] In addition, the United States abandoned its tacit support for South Africa, with Congress passing the Clark amendment, forbidding aid to groups fighting in Angola.[111] An OAU vote recognizing the MPLA as the legitimate government of Angola removed any trace of international legitimacy from the South African intervention, and South Africa was forced to withdraw.[112]

In the aftermath of Operation Savannah, SWAPO was "in a stronger military position than ever before. . . . It could set up an open training, administrative and logistics structure inside Angola and launch its insurgents southwards as it chose," and South African elites were aware that the "security commitment on our borders is likely to get bigger, not smaller."[113] Despite these threats, for the rest of 1976 South Africa restricted itself to minor operations, fearful of triggering further escalation.[114] South African forces stayed mostly on the South West African side of the border, particularly in Northern Ovamboland, where they achieved some success against SWAPO insurgents.[115] The same pattern continued throughout most of 1977, despite SWAPO achieving increasing lethality and operational skills due to the training it was receiving from Cuban advisers.[116] However, attacks against South African forces in northern South West Africa by insurgents, who would often fall back across the border into Angola when South Africa responded, became increasingly common and difficult for South African forces to deal with.[117] One incident in October 1977 led to South Africa crossing the Angolan border in a more substantial way. South Africa responded to an unusually large group of around ninety insurgents crossing into Ovamboland that attacked a South African patrol. At the end of the skirmish, the South Africans had penetrated twenty-one kilometers into Angola and killed sixty-one insurgents, for a loss of five South African forces.

Thus, overall, South Africa continued to behave in a relatively restrained manner inside Angolan territory. Nonetheless, it continued to respond when attacked, harried insurgents in South West Africa, and gave short shrift to a peace proposal made by Britain, the United States, France, West Germany, and Canada (the "Western Five") that it viewed as unacceptable because it would have required a substantial South African drawdown from South West Africa without corresponding concessions on the Angolan side of the border.[118]

At the end of 1977, however, Prime Minister Vorster and advisers met in the resort of Oubosstrand with the belief that it was necessary to take stronger actions against SWAPO. In spite of this, Vorster was hesitant to take the war into Angola and concerned about the possible escalation that might result. Ultimately, a compromise was reached: tanks could be used but not aircraft, operations must be kept clandestine, and any military operations had to be approved at the highest level to reduce the risk of escalation.[119] No immediate actions were taken, however, and a planned operation (Operation Bruilof) that would have taken place twenty-five kilometers inside

Angola was abandoned for reasons that remain unclear.[120] Some of the planning for Bruilof was expanded and folded into a more ambitious plan, labeled "Reindeer," that was implemented in early May 1978 and hit three geographically separate targets simultaneously. Two of these targets, Chetequera and Dombondola, were close to the Angolan border, but the third, a camp near the town of Cassinga, was deeper inside Angolan territory. The attack on Cassinga was conducted by air, with South African special forces parachuted in and flown out to avoid the need for a substantial invasion of Angolan territory that would have risked escalation.[121] The South Africans viewed the attack as a success, although it ignited controversy over whether the camp attacked was a SWAPO military installation or a refugee camp protected by SWAPO forces, with critics accusing the South Africans of massacring hundreds of civilians, including many women and children.[122] In the aftermath of Operation Reindeer, up until the point at which South Africa acquired nuclear weapons, South African actions were again more restrained, although two "modest" operations took place in March 1979 (Operation Rekstok and Operation Saffraan) inside Angola and Zambia.[123]

Overall, therefore, South African behavior in the period leading up to nuclear acquisition was relatively restrained in terms of avoiding escalatory interventions inside Angola. While South Africa responded forcefully to attacks inside South West Africa, it did not generally conduct operations inside Angola with two exceptions, Operation Savannah and Operation Reindeer. In the former, South Africa had an increased tolerance for escalation because it anticipated support from the United States that failed to appear. The latter was a swift raid followed by a quick withdrawal of South African forces designed to minimize the risk of escalation. Although Operation Savannah demonstrated that South Africa had the military capabilities to conduct operations deep inside Angola, and South Africa was acquiring new conventional military capabilities over this period that *increased* its ability to project military power into Angola, South Africa generally sought to avoid conducting operations inside Angolan territory, and certainly avoided leaving forces in Angola for substantial periods of time.[124]

After acquiring nuclear weapons, however, South Africa became considerably more comfortable going deeper inside Angolan territory, doing so with greater regularity, and using heavier weaponry and larger numbers of forces to do so. Starting in 1979, South African officials began to take actions that would escalate the conflict in Angola, and began to adopt more ambitious goals in the conflict. A 1979 State Security Council document by Defence Minister Malan proposed a new strategy for Angola. He argued that "the political situation in Angola must be kept as unstable and fluid as possible," with the objective being the creation of "an anti-Marxist government in Angola."[125] P. W. Botha also approved "a more pro-active stance for the SA Defence Force."[126] As Robert Scott Jaster argues, "The war against SWAPO began in earnest in 1979."[127] This change in strategy was noticed by the out-

side world: a UN report from 1980 noted that a "significant reassessment and shift of South Africa's military and political posture" had occurred and that South Africa was dedicating significant resources to "extensive military operations on or across its borders."[128]

In May 1980, a few months after South Africa had acquired nuclear weapons, a decision was made that "SWAPO had to be taken on and beaten in its lair [Angola]."[129] This operation, code-named "Sceptic," was to take place in June 1980, and unlike in any operation since Savannah, the plan was that South African forces would stay inside Angolan territory for a significant period of time to deal with any SWAPO forces that escaped the initial assaults on bases at Chifufua, Ionde, and Chitumba. This marked a change from the pre-1979 South African modus operandi of quick strikes inside Angolan territory followed by a swift exit. Major General Geldenhuys described the new strategy as "comparable to what happens when an ant-hill is kicked open. The ants scatter, you search for them around their nest and they lead you to new nests. . . . A combination of area operations, follow-ups, and search-and-destroy operations [is] launched to locate and destroy them."[130] Such an approach required a considerably higher South African tolerance for keeping forces inside Angolan territory than it had typically had before 1979 (with the exception of Operation Savannah, in which South Africa believed it had US support). Scholtz summarizes the change: "Operation Sceptic . . . was an important development in the Border War. Its predecessors, operations Reindeer, Rekstok and Saffraan, had been limited in scope and time. Sceptic evolved into a much longer operation, during which People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) was hunted deep within its own rear areas in Angola for about three weeks. Apart from Savannah, this was the biggest and longest operation the SADF had been involved in since 1945."[131] Steenkamp concurs: Sceptic was "a far more ambitious venture than any of the previous external operations."[132]

South Africa's greater comfort with escalation continued after Operation Sceptic and is confirmed by participants in the conflict. Both Major General Opperman and Ambassador Zazeraj, for example, confirm that South African tolerance for escalation increased in the 1980s, while the historian Piero Gleijeses argues that South African elites "ratcheted up the pressure on South Africa's neighbors."[133] Throughout the rest of 1980 and early 1981, South Africa launched operations inside Angola, including Operation Klipklop in July 1980 and Operation Carnation, which ran from June to August 1981.[134] In May 1981, senior SADF officials concluded that they had to operate in Angola on a more sustained basis and "dominate a territory, instead of going in after specific bases and leaving again afterwards."[135] The resulting discussions led to Operation Protea. Protea used over four thousand troops and would be the largest SADF operation in the entire Border War and the largest mechanized operation by the South African Army since World War II.[136] Protea marked a further increase in South African aggression. For the first

time, South African forces took a semi-permanent occupying role within the province of Cunene, and the invasion was "so brazen that it provoked widespread condemnation from Western governments."[137] Such operations could not be undertaken without escalating the conflict. And, indeed, the Angolan army, the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), joined in the conflict between PLAN and the SADF on PLAN's side. The Cubans also began to play an increasing role, with Cuban pilots flying MiG-21s close to the combat zone (with one Cuban-piloted MiG-21 shot down by a South African Mirage), and the Soviet Union delivered T-54 and T-55 tanks and antiaircraft missiles to FAPLA.[138] While South Africa had previously sought to avoid such escalation, such concerns appeared less binding after 1979. South Africa followed Operation Protea with further operations "like waves in the wake of Protea."[139] Operation Daisy, a major operation targeting territory three hundred kilometers inside Angola (the deepest into Angola that the SADF would ever seek to strike during the Border War), was followed by other significant operations—Operation Makro in December 1981–January 1982, Operation Meebos I in March 1982, and Operation Meebos II in July and August 1982—all aimed at destroying SWAPO capabilities but with far less sensitivity to escalation than South Africa had previously exhibited.[140]

While 1982 saw some largely unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a cease-fire, the war continued at a low level with regular contacts between the SADF and SWAPO on and around the Angola-Namibia border, occasional South African operations over the Angolan border, and continued South African violations of Angolan airspace, something that South African officials no longer sought to hide. While such sorties were primarily for reconnaissance purposes, they occasionally engaged Angolan forces, and shot down an Angolan MiG-21 in October 1982. South Africa also continued to assist UNITA, facilitating a large expansion of the territory under its control and supporting a full-scale UNITA assault on an Angolan garrison at Cangamba, killing 120 Cuban forces.[141] Further, the escalation that South Africa most feared and had previously sought to avoid—a larger-scale Soviet involvement in Angola—was becoming increasingly likely. Increasing quantities of Soviet materiel were flowing into Angola, and a South African official in the United States was handed a note in November 1983 from a Soviet diplomat stating that "South Africa's continued occupation of Angolan soil and support for UNITA was unacceptable. . . . The USSR would give Luanda all the support it needed to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity."[142] Whereas before 1979 South Africa sought to avoid such escalation and controlled its operations accordingly, South Africa responded to this Soviet threat by launching Operation Askari, a large-scale operation aimed at destroying SWAPO's ability to launch an assault into South West Africa in early 1984. In particular, South Africa sought to force FAPLA forces in the Angolan provinces of Cahama, Mulondo, Caiundo, and Cuvelai to retreat, and sought to domi-

nate the approach routes that SWAPO would use in the event of an assault on South West Africa.[143] Askari was a significant operation, requiring large numbers of forces deep inside Angola. South African military leaders anticipated that the operation would last for two months, and an SADF planning document acknowledged that achieving South Africa's goals in the conflict would be "time-consuming."[144] Again, the result of South African aggression was escalation: "With the growing role of the Soviet Union . . . outside factors grew in importance, while South African control over the course of the war diminished."[145] As in the aftermath of Operation Protea, Askari led to a short-lived and unsuccessful effort to achieve a peace settlement.[146] This did not stop further SADF actions deep inside Angolan territory: in July 1984, South African Special Forces Commandos destroyed an oil pipeline in Angola's northernmost province, which led to the loss of forty-two thousand barrels of oil, and an Angolan and East German ship were damaged by mines that had been laid by the South Africans in the Luanda harbor.[147] Major conventional operations also continued, in addition to acts of sabotage and covert operations, with Operation Boswilger and Operation Egret being undertaken inside Angolan territory in 1985, and the war continuing to escalate until the late 1980s.

Overall, therefore, South Africa became more aggressive in the period after acquiring nuclear weapons. This change in behavior does not itself prove that nuclear acquisition *caused* the change. However, in combination with the evidence that South African elite thinking viewed nuclear weapons as a tool for reducing the risk of escalation associated with aggression, it suggests that South Africa both thought and behaved in a manner consistent with the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism.

Did South Africa also become more willing to compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition? Overall, there is little evidence to suggest this. While periodic peace initiatives were launched throughout the period, South Africa's demands remained constant. The basic South African negotiating position throughout the period, as articulated by Foreign Minister Pik Botha, was that "we were not ready to exchange [a war] on the Cunene [River, marking the border between Namibia and Angola] for a war on the Orange [River, marking the border between Namibia and South Africa]. . . . If Southwest Africa was governed by SWAPO there would be a serious risk that the Russians would threaten South Africa from that territory."[148] While South Africa accepted an independent Namibia in principle, it did not want to withdraw from South West Africa as long as doing so might increase the threat to South African territory. This position later became known as the principle of "linkage": that the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola and an end to SWAPO attacks within South West Africa were a prerequisite for a process that would lead to Namibian independence.[149] In reality, this meant that negotiations over the future of South West Africa were something of a sham. South African elites recognized that a free election in Namibia would

lead to SWAPO coming to power, an outcome that was unacceptable for South Africa and that precluded a full-scale South African withdrawal from South West Africa.[150] Overall, therefore, South Africa did not become more willing to compromise in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons.

It seems reasonably clear that South Africa engaged in increased aggression in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and did not engage in greater efforts to compromise. However, whether South Africa also engaged in greater steadfastness in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, as the theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates, is less clear. Even in the period before nuclear acquisition, South Africa responded forcefully to SWAPO attacks inside South West Africa but merely restrained itself in terms of operations inside Angolan territory that aimed at degrading SWAPO's capability to launch attacks. In the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South Africa continued to respond forcefully to SWAPO attacks but also engaged in more aggressive preemptive actions aimed at destroying SWAPO's military capabilities and reducing its capacity to plan and execute attacks. Thus, it is hard to identify any substantial changes in South Africa's steadfastness over the period of nuclear acquisition. Instead, the change in South Africa's foreign policy seems to have largely been an increase in aggression. Thus, this expectation of the theory of nuclear opportunism is not confirmed—nuclear opportunism anticipates an increase in South African steadfastness that we do not see in the historical evidence.

What about the remaining three behaviors? Did South Africa engage in greater levels of independence, defined as becoming more willing to take actions that its allies opposed? Did South Africa seek to strengthen its allies and thus engage in greater levels of bolstering? And did South Africa engage in expansion—widening its interests in international politics? South Africa's increasing international isolation over the time period makes assessing these claims reasonably straightforward, because South Africa lacked allies that it would have sought independence from, and allies that it could have plausibly sought to bolster. South Africa was "the skunk of the world," and South African foreign policy calculations were made on the assumption that "we were on our own."[151]

The only actor that could have plausibly restrained South Africa in the prenuclear period, and from which South Africa might have sought independence from in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, was the United States. And indeed, as discussed above, South Africa's nuclear posture was in large part aimed at encouraging US intervention in southern Africa if the conventional situation escalated beyond South Africa's ability to control it. In truth, however, South African elites did not view the United States as in any way committed to providing for South Africa's security. Indeed, this assessment of US ambivalence about South African security was part of the reason for the catalytic nuclear strategy, since it was believed that absent South African nuclear weapons, the United States would be highly unlikely to assist South Africa.[152]

As discussed above, the South Africans felt that the United States had left them in the lurch during Operation Savannah, and from that point on they regarded the United States as (at best) a fickle and unreliable ally. In Major General de Vries's words, "I don't think the United States was seen as an ally for our counterinsurgency war in South-West Africa and southern Angola. They dropped us with Operation Savannah. . . . They weren't our allies; there was no support from Americans on the ground. So we didn't like them that much."[153] As Major General Opperman recalls, "I think the United States lost all their credibility as an ally during Operation Savannah. We realized that the United States had only one interest, and that was their personal interest in the situation. . . . I don't think we ever considered the Americans to be reliable."[154] Major General Dippenaar describes the lack of reliability of US patronage, saying "One day they [the United States] will support you, the next day there will be a vote and they will say, 'Stop the support.'"[155] These sentiments were also expressed by South African leaders at the time, with Vorster telling the Rhodesians soon after Operation Savannah that "anyone who relied on the USA has his deepest sympathy," and P. W. Botha telling parliament that "we [went into Angola] with the approval and knowledge of the Americans. But they left us in the lurch."[156]

South Africans recognized that although there were factions in the US Congress and executive branch who were inclined to support them, there were also powerful forces pushing in the opposite direction, both inside and outside the government.[157] South African diplomat Pieter Snyman, who served in Washington, recalls that "we had good friends in Congress and in the administration, but [we knew that] they [might] succumb to the pressure of their own [antiapartheid] constituencies."[158] While the United States might sometimes offer support to South Africa, South African diplomats were well aware that such support could never be relied on. A memo from the South African ambassador to the minister for foreign affairs in 1977 summarized South Africa's view of the United States: "South Africa will always be available as a target [because of apartheid]. . . . In the circumstances South Africa can expect little overt understanding and no assistance."[159]

As a result, South Africa did not feel constrained by the need to maintain support from Washington, because it did not feel it was getting much US support, and certainly did not believe that the United States could be relied on to contribute to South African security. Major General de Vries confirms that South Africa did not, therefore, fear the loss of US support. South Africa was able in large part to "ignore the bad reputation and the snide remarks that came from countries such as the Western powers," because it did not cost South Africa anything to do so.[160] A 1981 CIA assessment concurred that South African elites believe they "can no longer rely upon the West for its security" and that "South Africa's policies on nuclear weapons will be made fairly independently of any U.S. security interests. Whether to develop

and display a nuclear weapons capability will depend almost entirely on the Afrikaners' sense of domestic and regional security."[161]

South Africa certainly imposed constraints on its actions in the Border War, as discussed above, but these were imposed by fears of escalation rather than by fears of a withdrawal of Western support. As a result, after acquiring nuclear weapons, South Africa did not become more independent of the United States. In fact, the South African relationship with Washington became closer in the 1980s. The Reagan administration placed a lower priority on domestic reform within South Africa; sought to "nurture evolutionary change" by working with, rather than isolating, the South African regime;[162] fought against (and vetoed) congressional legislation to impose sanctions on South Africa; and had greater tolerance for South African efforts to circumvent international sanctions. This shift in the US–South African relationship was not due to South Africa's nuclear weapons but due to the Reagan administration's greater ideological sympathy for the apartheid regime, its greater concerns about Soviet influence in the region, and the reduced priority it placed on human rights promotion within its foreign policy. An internal 1985 memo to Patrick Buchanan, Reagan's communications director, described the administration's position as "We don't like apartheid but we're just afraid to be too hard on S. Africa if the likely outcome will be communism," while also acknowledging that the Reagan administration had sometimes "sounded like lazy apologists for apartheid."[163] As the South African foreign minister put it in a memo to colleagues: the Reagan administration's assessment of its interests in Southern Africa was "more clinical and less a function of moral outrage [at apartheid]. . . . This will bring an end . . . to the acceptance as an article of faith of the need to promote, irrespective of the cost, political liberalisation in South Africa."[164] Nonetheless, both parties remained wary of each other. In the words of a US State Department briefing paper preparing the secretary of state for a meeting with the South African foreign minister early in the Reagan administration, "The South Africans are deeply suspicious of us. . . . South African truculence (which can be coated with great charm) is compounded by the fact that, as an international pariah, the country has had no meaningful, balanced bilateral relations in recent memory."[165]

South Africa also lacked allies that it would have felt any inclination to bolster. As Theresa Papenfus concludes in her biography of Pik Botha, "After Operation Savannah it was clearer than ever that South Africa had no friends."[166] While South Africa had proxies that it supported in pursuit of its regional goals (notably UNITA in Angola and the Liberation Front of Mozambique in Mozambique), these were not states that South Africa could use nuclear weapons to bolster.

Aside from the United States, South Africa's most meaningful relationship over the period was with Israel, with which South Africa enjoyed an important, though highly secretive, relationship.[167] The South Africa–Israel rela-

tionship bought South Africa access to Israel's advanced conventional weaponry and nuclear technologies, and South African military officials frequently found themselves in Israel to shepherd through such deals. Major General Dippenaar, for example, recalls being posted to Israel as an "agricultural adviser," although in reality he was there to learn from the way the Israelis conducted mobile warfare and to facilitate "transferring technologies which would then help with the development of other weapon systems."[168]

Despite its importance, the South African–Israeli relationship was largely transactional and based on mutually beneficial material exchanges: technology and arms transfers from Israel to South Africa, and natural resources (including uranium) and currency transfers in the opposite direction. As Sasha Polakow-Suransky summarizes the relationship, "Israel profited handsomely from arms exports and South Africa gained access to cutting-edge weaponry at a time when the rest of the world was turning against the apartheid state. . . . Israel denied its ties with South Africa, claiming that it opposed apartheid . . . even as it secretly strengthened the arsenal of a white supremacist government."[169] The transactional nature of the relationship, the vast distances between the two countries, and the more immediate defense priorities that both countries felt meant that South Africa felt no inclination to directly provide for Israel's security. As a result, South Africa did not consider it politically attractive to seek to bolster Israel's position in the Middle East in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, and there is little evidence that the relationship changed in its aims or scope as South Africa acquired nuclear weapons: substantial conventional arms transfers continued much as before. Indeed, the secrecy of the South African–Israeli relationship in both countries meant that any public bolstering of either state by the other would have been deeply politically challenging.

As a result, and in line with the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism, South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate either bolstering or independence in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition.

Nor did South Africa give any thought to engaging in expansion. South Africa was a state seeking to hold on to its position in southern Africa. Over the period of nuclear acquisition, South Africa was being buffeted from both within and without as it faced Soviet and Cuban forces in neighboring countries, diplomatic isolation, stringent antiapartheid sanctions, and increasing domestic instability and economic turmoil. For South Africa, merely maintaining its international position and domestic political institutions was becoming more and more challenging. As a result, it would have been highly surprising if South Africa had significantly expanded its interests in world politics in response to nuclear acquisition. And, indeed, while South Africa frequently went on the offense in Southern Africa, its strategic goals were ultimately defensive and status quo oriented: to hold on to what it had. In Scholtz's words, "The South African posture was offensive on the tactical,

operational, and military strategic levels, but defensive on the security-strategic level. . . . The government wanted primarily to preserve the status quo, but realised that a defensive military strategy and operational and tactical approach would not be sufficient."[170] No new alliances were entered into in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, nor did South Africa initiate disputes with countries within which it did not already have long-standing conflict. In the aftermath of nuclear acquisition, South African foreign policy thus remained firmly focused on the Frontline States, on its long-standing relationship with Israel, and on its fractious relationship with the United States, and held the ultimate goal of maintaining, not expanding, South Africa's position. This expectation of the theory of nuclear opportunism, therefore, is confirmed: South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to pursue expansion.

Other Explanations

The theory of nuclear opportunism thus performs well but not perfectly. It correctly anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and would not use nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise, independence, bolstering, or expansion. However, it incorrectly anticipates that South Africa would use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, which we do not see in the historical record. How do other theories perform in explaining the South African response to nuclear acquisition?

The theory of the nuclear revolution predicts that nuclear weapons would make South Africa more secure, and thus that South Africa would have less need to engage in aggression, expansion, or bolstering—all of which are behaviors driven by insecurity in the view of the theory of the nuclear revolution. However, the theory predicts that states may use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise after acquiring nuclear weapons. The theory of the nuclear revolution thus makes several correct predictions in the South African case: South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion or bolstering. But, in contrast to the predictions of the nuclear revolution, South Africa used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, it did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness or independence, and it did not exhibit a greater inclination to compromise after acquiring nuclear weapons. The theory of the nuclear revolution does not, therefore, perform as well as the theory of nuclear opportunism.

S. Paul Kapur's theory anticipates that South Africa would not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression.[171] Kapur anticipates that only conventionally weak, revisionist states use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. South Africa was conventionally strong relative to its neighbors at the point at which it acquired nuclear weapons. As discussed above, although South Africa faced serious threats during the period in which it acquired nuclear weapons, it never lost its conventional military superiority over its

opponents.[172] Because Kapur's theory requires both conventional weakness *and* revisionist preferences to predict increased aggression, Kapur would therefore predict that South Africa would not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression.[173] Kapur's theory thus misses the important way in which nuclear acquisition affected South African foreign policy: by facilitating conventional aggression.

A case-specific alternative explanation would be that the increase in South African elites' tolerance for escalation occurred not because of nuclear weapons but because of South Africa's increasing conventional military capabilities, which gave them greater power projection capabilities. As Colonel Breytenbach points out: "It depends on capability—how deep you can go."[174] Similarly, David Steward argues that South Africa stopped its advance in Operation Savannah in 1975 because "our defence force was completely unprepared for an operation of this scale—it didn't have artillery at that time, it had rudimentary 25 pounder cannons from the Second World War and it had overextended itself. . . . By the 80s we had significantly improved our operational capability . . . and this increased the capability of the SADF to operate."[175] It is certainly true that South African defense expenditure and military manpower rose dramatically throughout the 1970s and 1980s. South African military expenditure rose from $359 million in 1970 to $2.24 billion in 1979 and $3.6 billion by 1989.[176] This increase included expenditure on major new weapons systems (including the G5 and G6 artillery pieces, and the Cheetah fighter jet) that were commissioned and integrated into South Africa's force structure over this period.[177]

The weight of evidence, however, would argue against this explanation. First, South African capabilities were growing constantly over the entire period, and there was not a discontinuous change in capabilities in 1979 that might explain the change in South African behavior observed. Second, the evidence suggests that capabilities were not the relevant constraint on South African behavior. After all, Operation Savannah proved that South Africa could conduct operations deep inside Angolan territory, but Savannah was undertaken only because South African elites anticipated US support that failed to materialize. Such large-scale operations were not tolerated again until after South Africa had acquired nuclear weapons, despite South Africa's demonstrated ability to undertake them. Third, the military capabilities that a state chooses to deploy are in large part the result of the state's tolerance for escalation: South Africa's investments in conventional weaponry were the result of a desire to engage in increased aggression rather than a cause of it. And in the South African case, it is clear that at the point at which the South Africans wished to escalate, they provided their forces with the required military capabilities to do so. Colonel Breytenbach confirms that the government was willing to provide "equipment that would allow you to go further in" when it wanted to do so.[178] And, indeed, it was not simply the case that the war escalated in 1979 for reasons that were unrelated to

South African actions. The conflict escalated in 1979 because South Africa chose to escalate it. In short, South Africa took actions after 1979 that it knew would escalate the conflict and that it had not been willing to undertake before it acquired nuclear weapons.

Thus, although the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly in the South African case, none of the alternative explanations do better in explaining the ways in which South African foreign policy changed after South Africa acquired nuclear weapons.

The Abandonment of South Africa's Nuclear Weapons

Although South Africa's aggression continued well after it acquired nuclear weapons, the war in Angola ultimately came to an end with the withdrawal of Cuban and Soviet forces from the region. At this point, in the late 1980s, South Africa made the decision to abandon its nuclear weapons, first freezing and then dismantling its nuclear program. In doing so, South Africa became the first and, thus far, only state to give up indigenously produced nuclear weapons. Does this not count against the theory of nuclear opportunism, demonstrating the lack of utility that nuclear weapons offered to South Africa?

In fact, the reasons underpinning South Africa's nuclear abandonment reinforce rather than undermine the theory of nuclear opportunism. In the late 1980s, South Africa's security environment improved markedly. Cuban forces had left Angola, and the Soviet Union was in the process of abandoning its global ambitions. Thus, the primary factor that had motivated South African nuclear acquisition and engendered the particular political benefits that South Africa acquired from possessing nuclear weapons—the threats it faced—had dissipated. In this more permissive international environment, South African elites concluded that the benefits of nuclear weapons no longer outweighed the costs. Reform-minded South African elites recognized that persuading the international community to remove the crippling economic and political sanctions that South Africa faced would require progress both on domestic political reform and on nonproliferation: joining the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as a nonnuclear weapons state. As F. W. de Klerk was coming into office as president, Waldo Stumpf recalls a meeting in which de Klerk stated that "in my term of office, I'm going to take South Africa back to being a respected international member of the community. And that means two things, it means we're going to unban Mr. Mandela [and] dismantle the apartheid policy, and we're going to accede to the NPT."[179] South Africa acceded to the NPT in 1991 and disclosed the existence of its nuclear program in 1993.

As discussed in chapter 1, the theory of nuclear opportunism emphasizes the benefits of nuclear weapons but does not make any claims about the circumstances in which those benefits will outweigh the costs of possessing

them. In the case of South Africa, it is clear that in a less restrictive security environment, the benefits of nuclear weapons no longer outweighed the costs of the program: in the words of Peter Liberman, "Pretoria's sensitivity to the economic and diplomatic liabilities of the program" grew over the 1980s.[180] Second, from the perspective of the theory of nuclear opportunism it is unsurprising that states would reevaluate the value of their nuclear programs at the point at which the key variable determining the foreign policy benefits they acquire from nuclear weapons changes. In South Africa's case, the severe threats the regime faced had motivated nuclear acquisition and determined the ways in which South Africa used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression in Angola, but those threats had disappeared, opening up the political space for a fundamental reevaluation of South Africa's nuclear policy. In the words of André Buys, when F. W. de Klerk terminated the nuclear weapons program, "I was very happy. Some of my friends said, 'Shouldn't we have kept them?' but I said, 'We've had the strategy all along—it was threat based, and the threat has disappeared.'"[181]

The evidence, therefore, suggests that nuclear acquisition did affect South African foreign policy, even if apartheid-era political and military elites are often reluctant to acknowledge it. South African aggression in the Border War increased in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons, with South Africa becoming more willing to undertake military operations deep inside Angolan territory than it had previously been willing to do. The fears of provoking escalation that had previously constrained South Africa became less binding after the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

This effect is consistent with South African elite thinking: South African elites wanted to engage in greater aggression in Angola but were deeply worried about triggering escalation, and viewed nuclear weapons as a way of reducing the risk of such escalation occurring. Even if South African elites are disinclined to state explicitly that nuclear weapons facilitated South African aggression, the evidence supports that conclusion. That South Africa would respond to nuclear acquisition in this way is consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism but inconsistent with other explanations.

South Africa did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate the other possible behaviors: steadfastness, expansion, bolstering, compromise, or independence. This is largely, though not fully, consistent with the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism, which would have anticipated South Africa using nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in addition to aggression. Nonetheless, the theory of nuclear opportunism performs better than other explanations, such as the theory of the nuclear revolution or S. Paul Kapur's theory of emboldenment, neither of which expects to see South Africa using nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression. As with the British case, the theory of nuclear opportunism outperforms the alternative explanations as an explanation for how states use nuclear weapons to achieve their goals in international politics.