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Exporting the Bomb

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This article is adapted from remarks delivered at a Cato Institute Forum on Professor Kroenig's most recent book "Exporting the Bomb: Technology Transfer and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons."

From 1959 to 1965 France provided Israel with sensitive nuclear assistance, and by 1967 Israel is widely believed to have constructed its first nuclear weapon. Why did France help Israel acquire nuclear weapons? This wasn't a one-time event. These kinds of transfers of sensitive nuclear materials and technology have been going on for the past 60 years or so, but there has been no systematic research on the subject. There have been policy studies and journalism devoted to specific cases and academic research on nuclear weapons proliferation. However, almost all of this research is focused on the demand side of the equation. For example: Why do countries want nuclear weapons? Why do they give them up? There hasn't been comparable research on the supply side. The fundamental question is: Why do states provide sensitive nuclear assistance to nonnuclear-weapon states, essentially contributing to the international spread of nuclear weapons?

There is something of a conventional wisdom that says states will do so for economic reasons. Countries in dire economic circumstances, like North Korea today, might be willing to sell anything, including sensitive nuclear technology, in order to earn hard currency. This conventional wisdom is essentially incorrect. Instead, these sensitive, state-to-state, nuclear transfers are driven by a strategic logic. And the strategic logic results from the fact that the spread of nuclear weapons threatens powerful states more than it threatens weak states.

What is meant by powerful and weak states? A country that has the ability to project power over a potential nuclear-weapon state—the ability to invade that state with boots on the ground—is a more powerful one.

This is a relative definition of power. If you assume Iran is a potential nuclear-weapon state, countries that are relatively more powerful than Iran are countries that would have the ability to project power over Iran. This could include regional states. It would also include a country like the United States, which has global power projection capabilities. Relatively weak states are all other states in the world—states that couldn't conceivably invade Iran.

The spread of nuclear weapons is worse for relatively powerful states. First, it deters military intervention. Relatively powerful states might wish to intervene militarily to secure their interests, but if a country has nuclear weapons, it is more difficult to do that—the weaker country's weapons might deter the stronger country from intervening. Second, not only are countries unable to use military force to their advantage, they cannot use the threat of force to their advantage. We know that threats, in order to be effective, must be credible. But the threat to use force against a nuclear-weapon state is not very credible, so countries' coercive advantage against a nuclear-weapon state is reduced.

Third, precisely because relatively powerful states have the ability to put boots on the ground in the proliferant state, regional instability caused by the spread of nuclear weapons to that state could potentially pull these relatively powerful states into regional military crises. Fourth, because of the aforementioned reasons, relatively powerful states must try to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and monitor new nuclear states. Diplomatic, military, and intelligence resources are then diverted from other areas to the problem of proliferation.

Fifth, and finally, the spread of nuclear weapons threatens alliance cohesion. Powerful states like to use their military power, not only to threaten other states, but to promise protection to other states. Relatively powerful states can offer the promise of military protection as a foreign policy tool, but as nuclear weapons spread it becomes much more difficult to do that. Countries that have their own nuclear arsenal have some degree of security independence and are thus less dependent on the offer of military protection.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION UPDATE
is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.

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> "The spread of nuclear weapons is more threatening to relatively powerful states than it is to relatively weak states."

This is not an exhaustive list, but it captures some of the most important effects of proliferation for relatively strong states.

Contrast this with the perspective of relatively weak states who aren't threatened in the same way. Relatively weak states aren't deterred from intervening militarily as nuclear weapons spread—by definition, they're too weak. Second, it doesn't reduce the effectiveness of their coercive diplomacy—again, they're too weak militarily to employ military coercion effectively.

Third, they cannot be pulled into these regional crises—they lack the ability to project power over the proliferant state. Fourth, because the spread of nuclear weapons is less threatening to them, they don't need to devote as much attention to it. And fifth, it doesn't threaten to erode their alliance cohesion in the same way—again, they're too weak to promise military protection to other states.

For all of these reasons, the spread of nuclear weapons is more threatening to relatively powerful states than it is to relatively weak states. Moreover, to the degree that the spread of nuclear weapons threatens relatively powerful states, the weapons proliferation can, in certain circumstances, actually benefit relatively weak states. They benefit to the degree that the spread of such weapons constrains more powerful rivals.

This simple insight leads to three propositions about the conditions under which countries are most likely to provide nuclear assistance. First, the less powerful a state is relative to a potential recipient, the more likely the state is to provide nuclear assistance to the state. The logic is pretty simple—states don't want to constrain themselves. States that are powerful relative to a potential recipient aren't going to help that country acquire nuclear weapons and narrow the capabilities gap.

Second, precisely because nuclear weapons can constrain the conventional military freedom of powerful states, states will be more likely to provide nuclear assistance to a state with which they share a common enemy. Third and finally, because superpowers—for example, the United States today, and the Soviet Union during certain periods in the Cold War—are threatened by the spread of nuclear weapons everywhere, these states not only refrain from providing nuclear assistance themselves, they actually go on the offensive and try to prevent other states from providing nuclear assistance.

They are most successful in these attempts when dealing with countries that are somewhat dependent on them. States that rely on a superpower's security guarantee for their own security are more likely to judge that any potential benefit of providing nuclear assistance to a third party is outweighed by the cost of antagonizing a superpower patron. Alternatively, a state that does not depend on a superpower for their core security needs will be more likely to participate in these transactions.

This analysis has important implications for U.S. nonproliferation policy, beyond the specific issue of sensitive nuclear transfer. The United States, as the most powerful country in the world, is more threatened by nuclear proliferation than any other country. For the past few years, the U.S. government has struggled to understand why the Russians and the Chinese are reluctant to cooperate on the Iranian nuclear issue. Many explanations have been offered—for example, these countries have economic interests in Iran, or these countries just don't understand the threat—but the operating assumption is that they will eventually come around.

The true answer is much more fundamental: these countries are simply less threatened by a nuclear-armed Iran. The United States is a global superpower and nuclear proliferation anywhere—including in Iran—threatens America's dominant strategic position. For middle powers like Russia and China, with more limited spheres of influence, nuclear proliferation in a distant region is not a threat. In fact, these countries may even see a significant upside to a nuclear-armed Iran—because it would mean a constrained and thus weakened United States. American officials will struggle to convince others to join their fight against the spread of nuclear weapons. They must prepare to live with a nuclear-armed Iran, or, if they cannot do that, they must stop Tehran's nuclear program themselves. ■