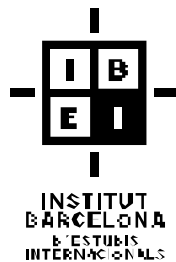


NUCLEAR WEAPONS AS SYMBOLS

The Role of Norms in Nuclear Policy Making

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Karsten Frey

Abstract Throughout history, nuclear weapons have been considered to be the ultimate weapons. This understanding largely detached them from the portfolio of conventional military means and assigned them a symbolic meaning that influenced the identity and norms creation of nations. In most countries today, the development of nuclear weapons is considered morally prohibitive, incompatible with a country's identity and international outlook. In some states, however, these negative norms are overridden by a positive set of norms, causing nuclear weapons to become either symbols of invulnerability to perceived threats or the regalia of major power status. Main purpose of this paper is to explore on the conditions that cause most states to develop a moral aversion to nuclear weapons, yet effectively lead to their glorification in others.

Many studies on the normative understanding of nuclear weapons consider the existence of a negative normative predisposition, often referred to as 'nuclear taboo', as a major factor in preventing their acquisition and use. Other studies acknowledge the existence of a nuclear taboo inhibiting the use of nuclear weapons, but point to the existence of the opposing effect of norms, frequently referred to as the 'nuclear myth', when it comes to the acquisition of nuclear weapons. This myth emerges when certain symbolic meanings are attached to nuclear weapons, such as a state's identity, self-image, and its desired position in the international system.

With 180 odd countries in the world abstaining from the acquisition of nuclear weapons and 8 countries in possession of them (with two further countries assumed to have pursued their acquisition), one might consider the dominance of the nuclear taboo over the nuclear myth to be the rule. The core question is thus why and how this relationship reversed in the case of defectors.

Key words: Nuclear Weapons, International Security, Nonproliferation, Foreign Policy, Norms in International Relations

1. Introduction

Since the detonations of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, nuclear weapons have been considered to be the ultimate weapons, incomparable to any other weapon system. Over time, this understanding largely detached them from the portfolio of conventional military means available to strategists and defence planners and assigned them a symbolic meaning that influenced the identity and norms creation of nations. In most countries today, the development of nuclear weapons is considered morally prohibitive, incompatible with a country's identity and international outlook. In some states, however, these negative norms are overridden by a positive set of norms, causing nuclear weapons to become either symbols of invulnerability to perceived threats or the regalia of major power status. Despite the vast literature on nuclear proliferation, more in-depth analyses have only recently been conducted to identify the conditions that cause most states to develop a moral aversion to nuclear weapons, yet effectively lead to their glorification in others.

The studies on these aspects of nuclear arming behaviour consider the existence of a negative normative predisposition, often referred to as 'nuclear taboo'¹, as a major factor preventing their acquisition and use. Many do not just acknowledge the existence of a nuclear taboo inhibiting the *use* of nuclear weapons, but point to the existence of the opposing effect of norms, frequently referred to as 'nuclear myth'², when it comes to the *acquisition* of nuclear weapons. At this stage, it is important to note that the emergence of the nuclear myth relates to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, not to their use. The phenomenon that many countries which acquire nuclear weapons still maintain a taboo with regard to their use becomes visible in the self-perception as 'responsible nuclear power' which dominates the domestic discourses within these states. The myth emerges when certain symbolic meanings are attached to nuclear weapons, which are perceived to reflect a state's identity, its self-image and its desired position in the international system.

The concept of 'nuclear myth' is closely related to the idea of prestige, which states seek internationally. The state is aiming at status gains through the display of power, usually for the purpose of increasing it. Nuclear weapons as symbols of omnipotence appear to be particularly attractive devices for some states in their aim to display power for this purpose. These states are "typically those states that lost the last major-power war and / or have increased their power after the international order was established and the benefits were allocated"³. Within the nuclear realm, the international order, established in 1968 through the NPT, preserves the power balance of this era by giving a superior status to the 5 then-dominating states. Those states which think of their status and power as having increased since then tend to oppose the regime. This opposition might be limited to diplomatic gestures in most cases of emerging powers, but in some other cases it might cause an emerging power to seek a system change by building up nuclear arms.

The motives of nuclear arming behaviour are thus bound to the socially constructed values attached to such weapons. According to Scott D. Sagan, "[f]rom this sociological perspective, military

¹ Among the more recent studies on the 'nuclear taboo': Tannenwald, Nina: Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo. *International Security*, Vol. 29 (4), Spring 2005; pp. 5–49.

² An excellent case study on the nuclear myth inherent in India's nuclear policy making is: Abraham, Itty: *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State*. London: Zed Books 1999.

³ Schweller, Randall L. in: Feaver, Peter D.: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? *International Security*, Vol. 25, No.1, Summer 2000; p.177.

organizations and their weapons can therefore be envisioned as serving functions similar to those of flags, airlines, and Olympic teams; they are part of what modern states believe they have to possess to be legitimate, modern states"⁴. While some states might consider the acquisition of nuclear weapons a necessary prerequisite for being a modern state, others develop diametrically opposed norms, along which the acquisition of nuclear weapons becomes inhibitive and incompatible with their identity as a modern state. Such opposing norms do not only emerge across societies, but also across the perceptions of different weapons systems within a society. For example, most of those states owning or developing nuclear weapons (with the exception of Israel and North Korea) signed the Chemical Weapons Convention while explicitly applying moral, normative driven arguments for doing so.

Both the taboo and the myth stem from a general and widely accepted understanding that nuclear weapons are different – incomparable to any other weapons system. Accordingly, both normative directions rest on the understanding of nuclear weapons as the ‘ultimate weapon’. Attempts to ‘trivialise’ the nuclear bomb as an acceptable and usable weapon similar to conventional weaponry, which were frequently made by defence planners and decision makers in nuclear weapons states – most prominently the US insistence on a first use option – largely failed to have much impact on the normative discourse. The nuclear taboo turned the first use of nuclear weapons into an incalculable military option. The nuclear taboo is thought to have trickled up from an increasingly sensitive civic society to the policy elite, frequently against the preferences of the respective defence community. The nuclear myth, on the other hand, appears to have followed a trickle down dynamic, in which the policy making elite attached a positive set of norms to nuclear weapons which was then adopted by larger segments of the society.

Within this paper, norms are defined as “a prescription or proscription for behavior ‘for a given identity’”⁵. In the case of norms favourable to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, these originate from two fundamental patterns, the first being what I call the desire of immunity, and the second being the desideratum for prestige. It is important to note that the desire for immunity which a state might try to satisfy through the acquisition of nuclear weapons is not equivalent to security seeking. Rather, it denotes both the state’s desire to protect itself in response to perceived insecurity and its desire to do this autonomously. It implies both dimensions: a sense of security and sovereignty. The likelihood of states wanting nuclear weapons is high if a) they feel an imminent sense of insecurity, b) their normative predisposition favors an independent, ‘sovereign’ foreign policy, and c) they display a pronounced perception of the nation’s relative potential power.

With 180 odd countries in the world abstaining from the acquisition of nuclear weapons and 8 countries in possession of them (with two further countries assumed to have pursued their acquisition), one might consider the dominance of the nuclear taboo over the nuclear myth to be the rule. The core question is thus why and how this relationship reversed in the case of defectors. In other words, which dynamics within the norms composition made nuclear weapons become symbols of international prestige and immunity, rather than abhorrence, in the perception of defectors?

⁴ Sagan, Scott D.. 1996/97. Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb. *International Security* 21 (3): 74.

⁵ Tannenwald, Nina. 2005. Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo. *International Security* 29 (4): 8.

2. The Psychology of Nuclear Policy Making

The normative disposition of a country towards nuclear weapons is rooted in the identity of its society. The conception of identity in the context of foreign policy choices reflects the idea a society has about what its country stands for in the world in comparison to other states. This comparative identity conception determines whether a country views its position as more competitive or accommodative, reclusive or inclusive, high or low in the perceived international status ranking. The concept of identity translates into norms as behavioral patterns determining foreign and nuclear policy choices.

The way such intersubjectively established norms, stemming from a collective identity, manifest in nuclear policy is through an us-against-them pattern that contrasts the self-defined 'us' to a real or imagined antagonist. During the Cold War, this antagonism was defined through ideological antinomies; in postcolonial states – which most of the proliferating powers in the post-Cold War era are –, the role of the 'other' is almost inevitably assigned to the former colonial power and/or its perceived successor. This pattern is most visible in the cases of India and Iran, in which the nuclear narrative carries a strong anti-colonialist undertone. The discourse in these countries displayed emotional patterns, in which the opposition against the 'global regime of nuclear apartheid' resembled the struggle for independence.

Postcolonial identities tend to add strong emotional dimensions of humiliation and pride to the definition of the us-against-them antagonism and strongly impact the collective sense of sovereignty. This emotional disposition clashes with the international nuclear order, in which former colonial powers or their perceived successors claim supremacy through an unequal treaty pushed through by a safeguard regime, which is often perceived to violate the sense of sovereignty and national dignity defined by post-colonial states. The strong sense of sovereignty displayed by postcolonial states, and their search for the 'right place at the table' in the international arena, which often translates into a pronounced sense of national prestige and status, are both crucial conditions for the emergence of the nuclear myth, i.e. the set of norms favourable towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

3. Emotions and Nuclear Choice

Identity generally translates into norms via emotionalised cognitive patterns. More than on any other issue, the societal debate on the nuclear question is guided by emotions and passionately defended normative principles of good and evil. This raises the question about the role of emotions in foreign policy in general, and nuclear policy in particular. While a deeper analysis of the psychology behind the emergence of emotions is beyond the scope of the present study⁶, it is worth exploring their impact on the creation of norms as behavioural patterns in the process of nuclear policy making. As defined within this study, emotions are socially constituted and exist only in relation to a social encounter. They are based on the shared values, beliefs, and desires articulated by society. Emotions are "constituted in order to serve sociocultural functions... to restrain undesirable attitudes and behaviour, and to sustain

⁶ For an overview of the biological, cognitive, and behavioural components of emotions and their impact on foreign policy, see: Crawford, Neta C.. 2000. The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships. *International Security* 24 (4): 116-156.

and endorse cultural values”⁷. This social constructivist understanding of emotions is well suited to explaining cross-cultural variations in the role emotions play in states’ nuclear policy making.

Emotions strongly impact actors’ perceptions of others’ intentions and capabilities and determine whether the relationship is perceived in reclusive or inclusive terms. The link between the cognition and perception of actors in the international arena is described by Robert Jervis:

*It is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others. That is to say, these cognitions are part of the proximate cause of the relevant behaviour and other levels of analysis cannot immediately tell us what they will be. And even if we found that people in the same situation... behave in the same way, it is useful to examine decision-making if there are constant differences between the decision-makers’ perception and reality*⁸.

An important feature of the actors’ perception is their displayed stereotypization of the imagined other. Oversimplification and demonization, both intrinsic features of stereotypes, cause people to reason along the simple moralistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil. A negative attitude towards the antagonist causes the actor to perceive the other’s various complex, often contradictory, policies with similar bias to what Jervis refers to as the *source-message interaction*. Stereotyped images are thereby remarkably persistent over time. Actors do not easily adapt their stereotyped perceptions to reality but, on the contrary, tend to adjust real facts to their perceptions: “Our stereotyped world is not necessarily the world we should like it to be. It is simply the kind of world we expect it to be”⁹.

The persistency of pre-existing beliefs largely detaches nuclear policy making from short-term policy changes by outside powers or short term structural changes of the strategic environment. Further, oversimplification leads to *irrational cognitive consistency*: once the narrative on nuclear weapons shifts towards their affirmation, their value becomes attributed to several logically unrelated issues. When the decision is made in favour of acquiring the bomb, the affirmative position is defended vigorously and defectors within the domestic arena are categorically denied. These forces of escalation are referred to by Jacques E. C. Hymans as a ‘rally round the flag’ effect¹⁰. The often shrill and uncompromising rhetoric is an act to reassure oneself about the consistency of one’s decision. Jervis refers to this phenomenon as *cognitive dissonance*:

The central contribution of the theory of cognitive dissonance is the argument that people seek to justify their own behaviour – to reassure themselves that they have made the best possible use of all the information they had or should have had, to believe that they have not used their resources foolishly, to see that their actions are commendable and consistent... In constructing defensible postures to support their self-images, people must often rearrange their perceptions, evaluations, and opinions. To see that their decisions were correct may involve increasing the value they place on what they have achieved and devaluing what they sacrificed. By spreading apart the earlier alternatives

⁷ Claire Armon-Jones, quoted in Crawford, Neta C.: op.cit.: 129.

⁸ Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 28, 29.

⁹ Walter Lipman cited in Jervis, Robert: op.cit.: 372.

¹⁰ Hymans, Jacques E.C.. 2006. *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 45.

*and heavily weighting sunk costs, inertia and incrementalism are encouraged. Each step in the process of developing a policy adds psychological pressures to take further steps*¹¹.

4. A Model of Nuclear Choice

The starting point of any comprehensive explanatory approach to nuclear choice is the understanding that a clear distinction exists between conventional and nuclear weapons. This distinction does not rest on the differences in military application or level of destructive power. Rather, the distinction is socially created, reflecting the identities of the actors involved. Identities translate into norms determining behavioural patterns. As previous sections have shown, in the process of norms creation emotions such as pride and fear are attached to the nuclear issue. In this process, nuclear weapons emerge as symbols of immunity and prestige.

In his model on the nuclear choices of state leaders, Jacques E. C. Hymans developed the *National Identity Conception* (NIC) as the independent variable, which he defines as “an individual’s understanding of the nation’s identity – his or her sense of *what the nation naturally stands for* and of *how high it naturally stands*, in comparison to others in the international arena”¹². The NIC is a deep-seated belief that does not change over time. With regard to ‘what the state stands for’, Hymans distinguishes between those defining their state’s position in ‘oppositional’ terms, and those defining it in ‘sportsmanlike’ terms. With regard to the leaders’ understanding of ‘how high it stands’, Hymans distinguishes between the ‘nationalists’ and the ‘subaltern’. In the evolving 2x2 matrix of different leaders’ identity types, the ‘oppositional nationalist’ leader is most likely to develop a positive attitude towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons:

*Oppositional nationalists see their nation as both naturally at odds with an external enemy, and as naturally its equal if not its superior. Such a conception tends to generate the emotions of fear and pride – an explosive psychological cocktail. Driven by fear and pride, oppositional nationalists develop a desire for nuclear weapons that goes beyond calculation, to self-expression. Thus, in spite of the tremendous complexity of the nuclear choice, leaders who decide for the bomb tend not to back into it. For them, unlike the bulk of their peers, the choice for nuclear weapons is neither a close call nor a possible last resort but an absolute necessity*¹³.

What is the link between fear and the nuclear arming behaviour of a state? To answer this critical question, one has to look at Hyman’s distinction between ‘oppositional’ and ‘sportsmanlike’ identity types. Whereas the oppositional identity denotes a dichotomised us-against-them pattern, the sportsmanlike identity concept places the us-against-them pattern “within a broader, transcendent identity conception”¹⁴. Through his multi-level identity, the sportsmanlike actor does not define his relationship to his antagonist in purely oppositional terms, but develops a sense of commonality by maintaining a certain we’re-all-in-the-same-boat attitude. This *solidarity dimension* is crucial in the translation of identity into the two fundamental norms, the ‘nuclear taboo’ norm (originating from the

¹¹ Jervis, Robert: op.cit.: 406.

¹² Hymans, Jacques E. C.: op.cit.: 13.

¹³ *ibid.*: 2.

¹⁴ *ibid.*: 23.

'sportsmanlike' identity conception) and the 'nuclear myth' norm (originating from the 'oppositional' identity conception). The stronger the actor's sense of commonality is, the more likely he will develop a sense of abhorrence and opprobrium with regard to those weapons symbolising 'the other's' potential total annihilation. In contrast, those actors defining the relationship to 'the other' exclusively in oppositional terms tend to be attracted by the sense of immunity symbolized by nuclear weapons as deterrent devices.

Pride, or, for that matter, the desire for status, is the second crucial element of the identity concept. It denotes the vertical dimension of the relationship between the self-defined 'us', and the real or imagined antagonist. This desire for status translates into an attitude favouring acquisition of the bomb if a) the self-defined 'us' equals or tops 'the other' in terms of status, and b) 'the other' owns nuclear weapons which are perceived to contribute to its status. The latter is of particular importance. It is reasonable to assume that most states define their position at least in equal terms as compared to the antagonist¹⁵. Only if the antagonist is thought to derive its elevated status from nuclear weapons does the desire for status actually translate into the aspiration to seek the bomb. A historically rare exception is the case in which the self-defined 'us' is considered superior in status-terms, causing the state to build-up nuclear weapons even if its opponent is non-nuclear¹⁶. On the other side, among those countries that have military nuclear potential but abstain from acquiring the bomb, the desire for status might even increase the country's anti-nuclear stance if the other advocates a pronounced nuclear taboo as part of its international standing¹⁷.

In contrast to what many scholars suggest, fear is not necessarily a stronger motivator than pride. History is rich in examples of states that were actually willing to sacrifice some of their perceived security if this was considered to be the price for status increase, a phenomenon well studied in Classical Realism. As Randall L. Schweller reminds us, these states "must gain relative to others; and throughout history states striving for greater relative power, often driven by prestige demands for their rightful 'place at the table' or 'place in the sun,' have routinely sacrificed their security in such a quest".¹⁸ In fact, much of the spadework on the role of status in international relations was done in Classical Realism. The idea of the 'policy of prestige' in international relations, as conceptualised by Hans J. Morgenthau, is as integral between states as it is between individuals in everyday life. According to Morgenthau, the policy of prestige's "purpose is to impress other nations with the power one's own nation actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses"¹⁹. Within the identity conception of states, the nuclear myth turns the bomb into a particularly prestigious device, and as such, provides the perfect trajectory for increasing the reputation of power.

¹⁵ One might think of Germany, which explicitly sought an inferior status as compared to its nuclear armed 'others' France and Great Britain, as the exception. But this exception was caused by unique historical circumstances: a lost World War.

¹⁶ The nuclear weapons state which explicitly acquired its capabilities against non-nuclear antagonists is Israel. While some indications exist that Israel indeed defines its status in superior terms, as compared to the antagonist, it appears reasonable to assume that the fear dimension of its identity conception played a paramount role in its nuclear choice. An indication for this assumption is the comparably low profile of the public debate in Israel on the status dimension of nuclear weapons. North Korea might be considered another case, if one thinks of South Korea and Japan as its non-nuclear others. This case is weak however, considering the vast technological superiority of both countries' military hardware (notwithstanding the role of the USA in North Korea's calculus). Finally, the USA, as the world's first nuclear weapons state, might be considered as yet another historical example. While one could again detect some attitude of superior status, this case is nevertheless exceptional, as its nuclearization occurred prior to the emergence of a discourse on nuclear weapons in which the attendant norms developed.

¹⁷ The Scandinavian countries might serve as historical examples for this kind of dynamic.

¹⁸ Schweller, Randall L.. 1998. *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*. New York: Columbia University Press: 21.

¹⁹ Morgenthau, Hans J.. op.cit.: 84.

5. A Critique of Traditional Deterrence Theory

Most attempts to explain states' nuclear arming behaviour refer to security seeking as the most relevant motive. Indeed, all states owning nuclear weapons or actively pursuing them can reasonably claim to be threatened by one or several other states. In his seminal work, Kenneth Waltz summarised six security-centred motives:

First, great powers always counter the weapons of other great powers, usually by imitating those who have introduced new weapons...

Second, a state may want nuclear weapons for fear that its great-power ally will not retaliate if the other great power attacks...

Third, a country without nuclear allies will want nuclear weapons all the more if some of its adversaries have them...

Fourth, a country may want nuclear weapons because it lives in fear of its adversaries' present or future conventional strength...

Fifth, some countries may find nuclear weapons a cheaper and safer alternative to running economically ruinous and militarily dangerous conventional arms races...

Sixth, countries may want nuclear weapons for offensive purposes...²⁰.

While all of the above arguments appear to be commonsense, and as such make the list a seemingly reasonable explanation to the nuclear arming behaviour of states, they also reveal a major flaw common to most security-centred approaches: while all nuclear weapons states fall in at least one of the above categories, most of the non-nuclear weapons states do as well. In fact, most of the threats identified in the first five motives for causing a state to build-up nuclear weapons could easily be spotted in similar security environments where states abstain from developing the bomb. The all-embracing nature of this set of motives makes them more or less redundant and robs much of their explanatory power.

Motives that are only indirectly related to the proliferating power's quest for self-preservation, such as those related to the state's desire for self-reliance in defence matters or to the prestige value attributed to possession of nuclear weapons, are frequently dismissed: "(T)he nuclear military business is a serious one, and we may expect that deeper motives than desire for prestige lie behind the decision to enter it"²¹. Obviously, for Kenneth Waltz et. al., explicating the arming behaviour of states through rather intangible motives like prestige seems absurd in the face of such dramatic and far reaching decisions. But Waltz's disregard of such motives appears to be a major inconsistency within the central paradigm of his own theoretical approach. The main *raison d'être* of (Neo-)Realist Theory is based on its claim to reflect the world as it is, not as it should be. By dismissing a wider range of motives and underlying

²⁰ Waltz, Kenneth. 1981. *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*. *Adelphi Papers* Number 171. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies: 7-8.

²¹ *ibid.*: 8.

cognitive processes as inappropriate for guiding important decisions (like the acquisition of nuclear weapons), Waltz describes how arming decisions should be made rather than how they are made in actuality.

Security centred approaches are deficient because they rest on an understanding of 'rationalist' behaviour that is unable to comprehensively adapt to emotional patterns such as pride (or, for that matter, prestige) and fear. This simplified understanding causes Rationalists to marginalize the role of pride. More problematic, it suggests that the complex emotional pattern of fear merely causes a state to back down (in fact, deterrence theory is entirely based on this assumption), thereby neglecting other, much more offensive behavioural patterns which might be caused by the fear emotion, a phenomenon well studied in the realm of psychology. As Neta C. Crawford concludes,

ironically, the emotions that security scholars do accept as relevant – fear and hate – seem self-evidently important and are underproblematized. This taken-for-granted status, especially of fear, has particularly pernicious effects. Nor have scholars carefully examined other emotions, such as empathy and love²².

While most scholars today take Waltz' structuralist set of motives as the starting point of their research on the causes of nuclear proliferation, very few writers limit their focus to structural causes alone, as its orthodox variant suggests, and include further explanatory variables. The nature of the orthodox approach appears to make it more popular among apologists of nuclear arms acquisition. Frequently the emphasis is on justifying rather than explaining nuclear arming behaviour.

The difficulties structuralists have in conceptualizing and operationalizing existing norms and emotions rest on their subjective nature; that is, they exist beyond material or legal dimensions simply because people believe in their existence. Yet another problem lies in the difficulties in tracking empirical evidence for their existence. In contrast to the positive and seemingly simple method of measuring military power (two bombs are more powerful than one), tracking evidence for the existence and importance of norms requires rather sophisticated and often ambiguous methods of discourse analysis.

Some structural Realists have tried to accommodate norms by introducing them as part of states' struggle for relative power gains. Within this conceptualisation, norms such as the nuclear taboo are a strategy on the part of some states to delegitimize, and hence weaken, the power of the adversary's weapons systems²³. This interpretation of the nature and origin of the nuclear taboo as a mere strategy of states appears to be flawed, as it ignores the role grassroot movements and further non-state actors played in establishing it.

Despite the deficiencies of security centred explanations, it appears reasonable to assume that the desire for self-preservation figures prominently in the preference system of any state with regard to its nuclear choice. This desire is, however, guided less by the relative power composition than by the security

²² Crawford, Neta C. op.cit.: 118.

²³ For a debate of the role of norms in Realism, see: Sagan, Scott D.. 2004. Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction. In Hashmi, Sohail and Steven Lee (eds.): *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, 73-95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

perceptions that originate from nuclear weapons' symbolic stature as the ultimate weapons and the embodiment of the human dream of invulnerability. In other words, from the proliferant's viewpoint nuclear weapons figure as totems of power which increase the perception of security. It is thereby important to note that the motivation for doing so is the actor's fear perception, not existing danger. Correspondingly, the increase of security perceptions is not necessarily caused by an increase of security. The relationship between fear and danger, and its relevance to nuclear policy, is outlined by Jacques E. C. Hymans:

As the experience of fear is physically uncomfortable and mentally oppressive, the urge to decrease the fear... can become as important to the individual as the urge to decrease the danger. This is the most significant of all behavioural consequences of the fear emotion, for the behaviours that decrease the fear are not always danger-decreasing as well. The urge to decrease the fear can be seen at the root of many seemingly irrational responses to threat, from the 'ostrich' approach of simply sticking one's head in the sand, to witch hunts and the appeal to protective dieties, or to the acquisition of totems of power²⁴.

With all their inherent symbolism as ultimate weapons, nuclear bombs strongly impact the perception of fear.

In contrast to the Rationalist conception of threat, fear tends to become 'irrational' by increasing the threat perception to a disproportional extent – in contrast to the actual threat level –, often triggering excessive reaction to its source. Further, fear increases the actor's sense of urgency. This phenomenon impacts the willingness of the decision maker to take immediate action. It also reduces the set of variables he takes into account to reach that decision. Further, it impacts the process by which the decision is made by excluding expert advice, which might introduce differing opinions and increase the complexity of the decision, and shortcutting the institutional chain of decision making. The fearful actor's sense of urgency and his preference for simple and clear-cut choices adds to the potential nuclear proliferators' predisposition to act alone. It further interrelates with their pronounced perception of the nation's relative potential power by creating an emotionally powerful sense of defiance, which forecloses fear reduction through reconciliation or accommodation. These negative effects are widely underproblematized in Deterrence Theory.

6. Of Nuclear Myths and Nuclear Taboos: The Case of India

The academic discourse has found the Indian case not only to be the most rewarding, but also the most complex and puzzling among recently emerged nuclear weapons states, as the country's (immediate) security motives are less obvious than in other cases. When news about India's detonation of several nuclear devices in May 1998 spread, public life in India's major cities erupted into a collective exaltation, which included strangers embracing in the streets, overwhelmed by the events occurring in the Pokhran desert. In the following days, a wave of national pride swept through the country. The

²⁴ Hymans, Jacques E. C.. op.cit.: 32.

discrepancy between the somehow objectionable event – in actuality a step forward in the global spread of weapons of mass destruction – and the enthusiastic emotions it triggered, puzzled many observers.

At the time of the tests, India had neither appropriate delivery vehicles on which nuclear warheads could be deployed, nor a nuclear doctrine or deployment strategy. When asked by puzzled journalists whether this deficiency would create deterrence instability and thus be opposed to India's security needs, government officials responded that this neglect was justified by the nature of nuclear devices as unusable, symbolic elements of political power. This episode reveals the complex interrelation between the a state's quest for security and its desire for status. Despite the obvious role affective cognition played in India's nuclear choice, and the inadequacy of security-oriented approaches, the academic discussion following these events centred on the threats posed by China, Pakistan, or a combination of the two as the assumed causing factors behind India's nuclear breakthrough. This episode revealed once more—to use the words of Barry Buzan – that International Relations had failed as an intellectual project²⁵.

The case of India suggests that there is not necessarily an immediate causality between the pace of a nuclear weapons programme and changes in the power balance of the region. It further suggests that the key events that accelerated the course of India's nuclear weapons programme were generally less related to its regional strategic environment, and more to changes in the normative features of the nuclear discourse within the country. Two features of the Indian case are of particular relevance for the normative approach to nuclear weapons, and are therefore addressed in the following two sections. First, the fact that India is the World's largest democracy raises the question about the relationship between regime type, norms creation, and nuclear choice. Second, the strong normative guided opposition of India against the international nuclear regime, which dominated India's nuclear discourse prior to 1998, and which fostered India's resolve to test and to acquired a full-fledged nuclear arsenal, raises important questions about the implications of these dynamics for the global nuclear nonproliferation regime.

7. Nuclear Weapons and Democracy

Generally, the structures in which nuclear decision making of the second-generation nuclear weapons states is embedded, is not conducive to democratic control. The two-class system of nuclear weapons states created though the NPT in 1968 limited the number of acknowledged nuclear weapons states to those five countries which had conducted nuclear tests by 1964. By de-legitimizing (and de-legalizing) the nuclear weapons programmes of all states not formally acknowledged as nuclear weapons states, the NPT provides strong incentives for the second-generation proliferators of the past three decades to develop their nuclear programmes in opacity in order to avoid international sanctions²⁶. The structure of the international nuclear regime further impacts the nuclear decision making process. An immediate effect of opacity is the proliferant's insulation of the nuclear programme from conventional military

²⁵ Buzan, Barry and Richard Little. 1999. Why International Relations has failed as an Intellectual Project and what to do about it. *Millennium* 30 (1): 19-39.

²⁶ The concept of 'opacity' was introduced to the theoretical debate by Benjamin Frankel (Frankel, Benjamin. 1991. *Opaque Nuclear Proliferation*. London: Frank Cass.).

command and control structures, as well as from transparent decision-making by the political leadership. This thin chain of command and control promotes ad hocism by political leaders and usually limits the role of expert advice. Further, it increases its susceptibility to the parochial interests of the nuclear bureaucracy by limiting the number of veto players. Some authors challenge this by pointing to the emergence of a bureaucratic elite (who have a parochial interest in preserving the non-nuclear status²⁷) within the diplomatic corps and the defence establishment that is actively involved in the NPT negotiation processes and regular conferences.

The parochial interests of certain actors within the policy making process strongly influences the country's nuclear choice. Those actors interested in the acquisition of nuclear weapons commonly belong to the military, the military-industrial complex, the nuclear scientific establishment, and the political class. Frequently, the common interest of these actors leads to the formation of a coalition, a 'strategic elite', which seeks administrative as well as communicative power by controlling public opinion²⁸. By controlling public opinion, the strategic elite is able to create a positive public disposition towards nuclear weapons by building up threat perceptions, and, more significantly, by attaching symbolic values to nuclear devices: national pride, collective dignity, or their negative counter-values such as collective defiance and insult. The strategic elite acts like a catalyst to the nuclear policy by highlighting either the norms related to the nuclear taboo, or those related to the nuclear myth.

Public opinion plays the role of an amplifier of the norms related to nuclear weapons. In the case of democracies, the role of public opinion in the process of foreign policy formulation is ambiguous, as Hans J. Morgenthau pointed out in his seminal work on the politics among nations: "Especially where foreign policy is conducted under the conditions of democratic control, the need to marshal popular emotions to the support of foreign policy cannot fail to impair the rationality of foreign policy itself."²⁹ According to this line of thinking, decision makers face the problem of pursuing two fundamentally different interests, one being the formulation of an optimal foreign policy, and the other being individual political self-preservation, which is attained by seeking popular support. Reconciling these two interests is the main task of any democratic government. The government must thereby

secure the approval of its own people for its foreign policies and the domestic ones designed to mobilize the elements of national power in support of them. That task is difficult because the conditions under which popular support can be obtained for a foreign policy are not necessarily identical with the conditions under which a foreign policy can be successfully pursued. As Tocqueville put it, with special reference to the United States: 'Foreign politics demand scarcely any of those qualities which are peculiar to a democracy; they require, on the contrary, the perfect use of almost all those in which it is deficient'³⁰.

This approach highlights the problem with using the Lockian concept of public opinion as the standard against which government performance should be measured within the social contract. Particularly in the nuclear field, the successful administration of foreign policy requires a certain degree of long-term

²⁷ Sagan, Scott D. 1996/97. op.cit: 72.

²⁸ On the creation of a strategic elite in the Indian context, see: Frey, Karsten. 2006. *India's Nuclear Bomb and National Security*. Oxford: Routledge.

²⁹ Morgenthau, Hans J. .1993. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, revised edn, Boston: McGraw-Hill.: 7.

³⁰ *ibid*: 160.

strategic planning, the consideration of a complex array of options and conditions, as well as pragmatism and self-restraint. These qualities are frequently incompatible with the dynamics of public opinion. Due to its inherent symbolism, the nuclear issue tends to be publicly debated in an emotionalised, often passionate mode. The dangers of such dynamics are outlined by Hans J. Morgenthau:

A foreign policy that is passionately and overwhelmingly supported by public opinion cannot be assumed for that reason alone to be good foreign policy. On the contrary, the harmony between foreign policy and public opinion may well have been achieved at a price of surrendering the principles of good foreign policy to the unsound preferences of public opinion³¹.

Generally, the accountability of a democratic state to public opinion increases the inhibitive power of the nuclear taboo, but, if the nuclear myth dynamic prevails over the taboo, the pressures to build-up nuclear weapons as well. This understanding leads to the conclusion that democracies do not act more peacefully than authoritarian regimes on nuclear matters per se, but generally take a more determined position on the bomb – either against it (more frequently when the taboo prevails) or in its favour (more rarely when the myth prevails). Empirical evidence supports this assumption.

Among the 30 states which have military nuclear potential and would be capable of launching a nuclear weapons programme on short notice (but abstain from their development³²), 28 are democracies, and only two are considered largely non-democratic (Algeria and Egypt). This supports the assumption that democratic societies are more predisposed to the nuclear taboo than those in autocracies. On the other side, among the 8 countries with proven nuclear weapons capabilities, a majority of 6 are democratic (including Russia as a defective democracy), and only two are largely non-democratic (China and Pakistan)³³. This ratio also supports the assumption that democracies tend to display more determination on nuclear choice.

The special role democracies play in the global spread of nuclear weapons has been largely overlooked in the international discourse in recent years, which focused more on two supposed aspiring nuclear weapons states, North Korea and Iran — both considered largely non-democratic. This focus on the few cases of undemocratic (aspiring) nuclear weapons states is due to the widely shared understanding that, while democracies might be more prone to the nuclear myth with regard to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, they are – in comparison with autocracies — more committed to the taboo with regard to their use. The international public and academic discourse on nuclear weapons is headed by countries which are themselves democratic nuclear weapons states. Their self-perceptions as ‘responsible nuclear weapons states’ form an integral normative axiom of the discourse, directing the focus of the nonproliferation debate towards autocratic aspirants. However, the evidence in support of the assumption that autocratic states are more likely to use nuclear weapons, as compared to democracies, is weak.

³¹ *ibid*: 161.

³² Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Nuclear Status Map 2005: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/images/npp/nuke.jpg>

³³ Pakistan marks an exception, as its nuclear weapons programme was initiated during the first period of democratic rule under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from 1971 to 1977. The nuclear breakthrough in 1998 occurred during the second period of democratic rule, from 1988 to 1999.

Table 7.1. Regime Type³⁴ and Nuclear Ambitions in 141 Countries³⁵ (2006)

	Largely democratic	Defective democracies	Highly defective democracies	Moderate autocracies	Autocracies	Total
Total states	50	39	8	13	31	141
States producing nuclear energy	22	6	1	-	4	33
Abstaining States with military nuclear potential	22	6	-	2	-	30
States with active nuclear weapons programme	-	-	-	-	2	2
Nuclear weapons states	4	1	1	-	2	8

Sources: IAEA Data Centre <http://www.iaea.org/DataCenter/index.html>; Bertelsmann Transformation Atlas 2006: <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/atlas.0.html>; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Nuclear Status Map 2005: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/images/npp/nuke.jpg>; The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists: Nuclear Weapons Data http://www.thebulletin.org/nuclear_weapons_data/.

8. Conclusion: Lessons for Global Nuclear Nonproliferation

Within the rationale of security-oriented explanations, the international non-proliferation regime, similar to conventional arms control agreements, prevents the emergence of the action-reaction dynamics which cause (nuclear) arms races by increasing the transparency and predictability of the adversary's actions. Due to the provisions of the NPT, and particularly the IAEA safeguard regime, a state can be fairly confident about the non-nuclear status of its rival, thereby reducing the pressures to embark on a nuclear weapons programme.

While the number of states with military nuclear potential that abstain from developing nuclear weapons has increased over the past few decades to around 30, the number of states actually seeking nuclear weapons has decreased significantly. Currently, there are only two countries allegedly seeking the bomb (Iran and North Korea), while eight additional countries have already acquired it. These simple figures call into question the core strategy of the international struggle against the spread of nuclear weapons: that is, to control the supply side of nuclear technology.

International efforts to control nuclear technology started in the 1970s, first by the Zangger Committee and the London Club, and then in 1978 through the creation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). These efforts were triggered by several alarmist forecasts which estimated that the number of nuclear capable states, and – incorrectly, as it turned out – consequently the number of nuclear weapons states would increase sharply if the flow of technology was not restricted. Reality disproves this logic, which

³⁴ For the classification of countries to the regime typology see: Bertelsmann Transformation Atlas 2006: <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/atlas.0.html>

³⁵ 139 IAEA member-states, North Korea, and Taiwan. Other countries non-member to the IAEA do neither have a nuclear infrastructure nor the ambition to develop it.

many persistently adhere to into the present day. The number of military nuclear capable states has increased regardless of supply-side controls, but the number of states actually owning nuclear weapons remains low, despite differing predictions. Determined states have been able to develop nuclear weapons despite the imposition of strictest control measures, while the vast majority of military nuclear capable states do not see any reason why they should acquire the bomb. One reason why these estimates were, and continue to be, on the wrong track might be that almost all of them originate from (Western) nuclear powers and correspondingly reflect the mindset and identity conceptions of their sources.

Supply-side approaches affect the nuclearization of states in several contradictory ways. They increase the complexity and cost intensiveness of nuclear technology, which appears to have significantly hampered progress in ongoing nuclear programmes. On the other hand, this feature has become an integral part of the nuclear myth, in that the bomb has come to symbolize modernity, and accordingly boosted some states' ambitions to 'master the atoms'. Additionally, it further increases the 'oppositional' attitudes of the potential proliferator. Supply-side restrictions might also promote negative normative values by delegitimizing the possession of nuclear weapons and creating an international normative abhorrence regarding them. The cornerstone of the international nonproliferation regime's role in promoting the nuclear taboo is its clear distinction between the peaceful purposes of nuclear technology and military applications. However, by creating a two class system of states, the existing nonproliferation regime elevated nuclear weapons to the symbolic currency by which the exclusive and privileged 'nuclear club' is defined.

Instead of emphasising the supply-side of the nuclear problem, any effective nonproliferation policy would have to tackle the demand side first. A precondition to this is a clear understanding of how the demand side, i.e. state motives to seek the bomb, functions. To use the majority of states without nuclear weapons ambitions as the rule, the starting point would thus be a clear identification of the motives behind those defectors seeking the bomb. Their nuclear choice is grounded in the intersubjectively created understanding of the nation's identity, as compared to a real or imagined antagonist. As the study has so far shown, the likelihood that a nation will strive for nuclear weapons is high if

1. it develops an acute sense of fear
2. it lacks a sense of commonality with its real or imagined antagonist
3. its normative predisposition favours an independent foreign policy
4. the self-defined 'us' equals or tops the 'other' in terms of status
5. the antagonist owns nuclear weapons which are perceived to contribute to its high status

The ideal type of nonproliferation measure reduces at least one of the above five incentives (without simultaneously increasing others, which unfortunately many of the existing measures do). Generally, it is assumed that the creation of international rules and institutions such as the NPT and the IAEA

safeguard regime impacts the norms composition of individual states by boosting the nuclear taboo. Nina Tannenwald suggests four processes by which this nuclear taboo develops: societal pressure, normative power politics, the moral considerations of individual decision makers, and the iteration of non-use over time until it ossifies into convention³⁶. In recent history, two cases (India and Iran) marked an exception to this rule. The processes supporting the nuclear taboo reversed, and the emergence of the international nuclear regime impacted the norms composition by buttressing the nuclear myth. What happened? The nuclear discourse in India prior to the nuclear tests of 1998, as well as in Iran during the recent crisis with the IAEA, had very strong anti-Western (and, in its self-definition, anti-imperialist³⁷) undertones. In India, 'teaching the West a lesson' became the most popular slogan, which alone was thought to justify opposition to the international regime and the open acquisition of nuclear weapons. Clearly, in both cases an imagined nuclear-armed 'West', epitomised by the USA, became the antagonist 'other'. The tightening of non-proliferation legislation in the course of the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995, and the creation of the CTBT in 1996, increased India's sense of fear and urgency. Similarly, in the Iranian case, the threat of sanctions and even military intervention by the nuclear armed antagonist greatly increased its sense of fear. Thus, in both cases virtually all five of the above listed factors were in place, making the nuclearization of both states appear a consequential act.

The fact that those nuclear armed Western states that were perceived as the antagonist other lead the nonproliferation discourse with Iran greatly increases its determination to build-up nuclear technology, just as it did in the case of India prior to 1998. In both cases, the international nonproliferation institutions actually contributed to the determination to build-up nuclear weapons. This is because the perceived nuclear armed antagonist both portrayed itself as the leader of the nonproliferation discourse and acted in the name of the international community (as represented by the nonproliferation bodies). The IAEA was perceived by both Iran and India as a mere vehicle of the antagonist other to push through its discriminatory objectives. Next to the supply bias of their policies, the fact that the international nonproliferation institutions are lead by nuclear powers is surely the biggest obstacle to their effective functioning.

To conclude, what is needed is an institutional framework that at best formally accepts the status of nuclear weapons states (which the NPT provisions do), but resists being led by them. Incentives for establishing independent and equitable structures will hardly come from the nuclear weapons states themselves, even if they informally recognize their necessity. The reason for this is their dual interest, one being the prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons, the second being their own ambition to explore their nuclear capabilities. Next, it is clear that no all-embracing solution to the proliferation problem exists. Clearly, those cases of proliferation in which the proliferating power interacts with an extra-regional antagonist other, such as India and Iran, follow dynamics distinct from those in which specific regional antagonists are involved, such as Israel, North Korea, or Pakistan. In the latter case, regional solutions such as Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zones might be the key.

³⁶ Tannenwald, Nina. *op.cit.*: 12, 13.

³⁷ of higher principles.

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