

Nuclear Dominoes, US Nonproliferation Policy, and the NPT

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The Book Project

The causes and consequences of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Core argument on consequences:

Strengthened U.S. nonproliferation policy largely explains the decline in proliferation in recent decades.

Most importantly, a credible threat of sanctions established in the 1970s has deterred proliferation by states within U.S. sphere.

Because of effective deterrence at the threat stage, imposed U.S. sanctions have usually failed.

The Question for Today

What are the causes of U.S. nonproliferation policy?

More specifically:

Why did the United States strengthen its nonproliferation policy after 1964, abandoning selective proliferation schemes and concluding the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)?

The Punchline

Chinese nuclear test of 1964 caused policy shifts by increasing fears of nuclear domino effects.

These fears convinced policymakers proliferation could not be contained to individual cases of allied or unaligned states and had to be enforced across the board.

In order to prevent enemies and other dangerous states from going nuclear, it is necessary to prevent friends.

Outline

- I. Existing Explanations
- II. The Argument
- III. Historical Evidence
- IV. Conclusion and Future Research

Existing Explanations

Superpowers agreed on the NPT once they realized nuclear acquisition made their allies more autonomous (Coe and Vaynman).

Superpowers concluded NPT as a universalistic façade designed to prevent India and FRG from going nuclear (Swango).

The Argument

Increased fears of nuclear domino effects caused by 1964 Chinese test were a crucial motivating factor.

Following recent work, I assume that U.S. policy is designed to protect or improve U.S. geopolitical position.

However, proliferation by allied or unaligned states—if it could be contained—may not interfere with this goal in many cases.

Moreover, efforts to *enforce* nonproliferation against allies/unaligned states could *undermine* U.S. geopolitical position.

Strong belief in domino effects critical to explaining why U.S. enforces nonproliferation even against allied and unaligned states.

U.S. opposes allied proliferation in order to prevent proliferation by adversaries.

Adversary States

Proliferation in adversary states is very bad.

Cons

- Limits capacity of U.S. to use force in disputes.
- Immunizes state against conquest or regime change.
- Poses direct threat to U.S. and its allies.

Pros

- May cause state to moderate its behavior.

Allied States

Not nearly so clear in allied states.

Cons

- May increase allied autonomy.
- Could embroil U.S. in unwanted nuclear conflict.
- Ally may someday become enemy.

Pros

- Strengthen deterrence against shared adversary.
- Allows U.S. to free up conventional and nuclear forces.
- Avoids the potentially high costs of enforcing nonproliferation.

Unaligned States

Similarly unclear in unaligned states.

Cons

- May someday become enemy.
- May embroil U.S. in nuclear conflict (unlikely).
- May directly threaten the U.S. (unlikely).

Pros

- Still may be a shared enemy.
- Preventing proliferation may require unwanted U.S. security commitments.

The Role of Domino Fears

If proliferation could be contained in individual cases:

- 1) U.S. would consistently oppose proliferation by adversaries.
- 2) Selectively oppose/aid/allow proliferation in allied or unaligned states depending on the mix of pros and cons in that case.

A strong belief in nuclear domino effects—that proliferation cannot be contained to individual states—is necessary to explain why the U.S. opposes proliferation across the board.

In order to prevent enemies from going nuclear, U.S. must prevent friends.

Where Do Fears Come From?

Strongest triggers are tests by new nuclear states:

1. U.S. has often viewed tests as the “proof” of proliferation.
2. Tests are salient and force nonproliferation onto the agenda.

Tests will cause largest increase in nuclear domino fears:

1. They occur in previously non-nuclear region.
2. Emerging nuclear power is relatively poor/weak, making proliferation appear more feasible.

III. Empirics on the Causes of U.S. Policy

Observable Implications:

- 1) Fears of domino effects should be higher after the Chinese nuclear test when compared to before the test.
- 2) U.S. nonproliferation policy should move from selective toward universal after the Chinese nuclear test.
- 3) Policymakers should emphasize fears of nuclear domino effects as motivations for tightened policies in 1964-68.

I use archival documents and secondary sources as evidence:

Foreign Relations of the United States

Digital National Security Archive

National Security Archive

Establishing a Baseline: Eisenhower Administration

Under Eisenhower:

- Enthusiasm for nuclear sharing.
- NATO Stockpile Plan gives European allies effective control over U.S. nuclear weapons.
- MLF introduced as a precursor to a European nuclear force.
- Atomic Energy Act amended to allow aid to British program.
- Domino effects perceived to be relatively weak.

Establishing a Baseline: Eisenhower Administration

Pressuring France over its nuclear program “*would sacrifice everything that we had built up in NATO.*”

—Eisenhower, NSC meeting, 1957.

Eisenhower “*felt there was a great difference between NATO countries and other countries. He could conceive of nothing worse than permitting Israel and Egypt to have a nuclear capability, as they might easily set out to destroy one another... He could go along with the views of the Secretary of State until NATO countries came into the picture, at which point he found himself agreeing with the JCS*”

—NSC meeting, 1959.

NIE 100-4-60

20 September 1960

LIKELIHOOD AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF NUCLEAR CAPABIL- ITIES BY ADDITIONAL COUNTRIES

1. Over the next decade, a number of countries could produce nuclear weapons and certain of them could also develop missile delivery systems provided they made a major and very costly effort and started their programs in the next year or two. (*Paras. 10-13*) However only France is known to have programs underway; Communist China almost certainly has started a weapons program. West Germany, Sweden, Japan, and India could initiate such programs but are unlikely to do so in the next several years unless there is a dramatic shift in the international situation.

Establishing a Baseline: Kennedy Administration

Under Kennedy, shifts in favor of nonproliferation:

- Limited Test Ban Treaty.
- PALs installed on U.S. weapons in Europe.
- Negotiations begin on NPT.

However:

- JCS, Rusk, and others remained ambivalent.
- Administration refuses to give up the MLF.
- Kennedy decides to aid French and British programs.

Kennedy Administration

9/61: State Department memo recommends aiding India to conduct a nuclear test because *“it would be desirable if a friendly Asian power beat Communist China to the punch.”*

6/63: NIE concludes that domino effects after China unlikely:

“India probably would not embark on a nuclear weapons program on the basis of a Chinese detonation of a nuclear device... Japan also would feel an increased sense of pressure, but would be more reluctant than most other countries to develop a weapons capability.”

7/63: Rusk says to Harriman that abandoning the MLF *“would cause great confusion among our allies and wreck NATO.”*

Kennedy tells Harriman he *“wished to avoid any clause [in NPT] which would prohibit us from giving weapons to France if we so desired.”*

1964-1968: Johnson Administration

Ambivalence continues in early Johnson administration.

June 1964:

policy. Secretary Rusk asked whether the Government has seriously looked at the problem of giving India nuclear weapons in the event that China had such a weapon. Mr. Fisher indicated that he knew of no detailed look, but that he felt rather strongly that it would be more desirable to have U.S. controlled weapons providing defense or a deterrence against nuclear attack on India rather than India's having its own nuclear capability. Secretary Rusk indicated that he did not wish to prejudge this question but that he felt such a look would be useful. He pointed out that no Government position exists as to whether we would oppose other nations having nuclear weapons once China obtains them.

Chinese Nuclear Test

October 1964 Chinese test increases urgency of nonproliferation.

Washington, November 25, 1964.

TO

The Secretary of State
The Secretary of Defense
The Director of Central Intelligence
The Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission
The Director, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency

SUBJECT

Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation

The President has appointed a special Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Roswell Gilpatric, to study means to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The Task Force has been asked to examine the problem in its broadest ramifications. It is expected that the Task Force report will be available for the President by the end of January 1965.

Gilpatric Committee Debate

On one side, U.S. officials favor case by case approach to nonproliferation, MLF, and possible nuclear sharing in Asia:

- Dean Rusk, Secretary of State
- George Ball, Under Secretary of State
- Walt Rostow, Director of Policy Planning
- John McCloy, chairman of CFR



Arguments for a Selective Policy

Secretary Rusk asked the basic question of whether the US should oppose other countries' obtaining nuclear weapons over the next ten years. Should it always be the US which would have to use nuclear weapons against Red China? He could conceive of situations where the Japanese or Indians might desirably have their own nuclear weapons.

Ball suggests *“pool of nuclear weapons which could be drawn upon by India or Japan for use by their dual purpose delivery vehicles”* (Gavin 2004-2005).

Rostow calls for *“a country-by-country approach to nonproliferation, including a renewed push for the MLF...and possibly even an Asian MLF designed to satisfy nuclear ambitions among U.S. allies in the Pacific”* (Brands 2006).

McCloy to Gilpatric, January 1965

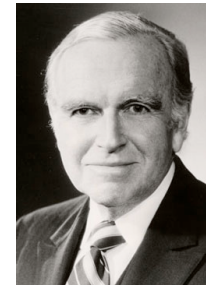
The above considerations have been adduced as reasons for abandoning M.L.F. or something like it and avoiding anything which may even look like proliferation to others. I believe that on the other hand we have not given due consideration to the price we may have to pay if we do give up M.L.F. and the concept of which it was a part. I believe that the risks we run on that score, at least equal, if they do not exceed, those that we risk with the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

in the handling of nuclear power in Europe. We cannot afford, in our own interest, to let the matter drift until the Alliance has deteriorated to such an extent as no longer to be a convincing front of combined power and policy vis-a-vis the Communist forces of the East. If we do let matters drift, as I believe 322 implies, and the present conditions indicate, we are on the way to losing both the essence of the Alliance and non-proliferation.

Gilpatric Committee Debate

On the other side of the debate, important actors favor across the board nonproliferation policy and abandoning MLF:

- Roswell Gilpatric, ex Dep. Sec. of Defense
- Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
- Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense



8/64 ACDA Paper

There are today at least three or four states in addition to the nuclear powers which could make a national decision to produce nuclear weapons with assurance that they have the national capability to support this decision. This number will increase as nuclear technology continues to develop throughout the world, as it becomes increasingly feasible to use manufacturing techniques amenable to clandestine operations, and as large nuclear power reactors are placed throughout the world producing thousands of kilograms of plutonium annually.

The detonation of a nuclear device by the Chinese Communists will place great pressure on these countries to make a national decision to develop nuclear weapons in some cases for reasons of security, and in other cases for reasons of prestige. Because of regional rivalries a national decision by any of these countries may force other countries perhaps technically less qualified to make a similar national decision to engage in an all-out effort to acquire nuclear weapons either by development or by other means. Once this process starts it may be impossible to halt.

The problem which faces the United States is how to prevent it from starting—how to develop political inhibitions against the development of further national nuclear capabilities which are sufficiently strong to stand the shock of a Communist Chinese nuclear detonation. The prob-

FROM MR. Gilpatric

TO MR. Messrs. Dean, McCloy and Watson

It should continue to be a prime objective of US policy in all cases to prevent the acquisition by other countries of an independent nuclear capability. To make exceptions in special cases would frustrate the entire objective of such a policy. For example, were India, with or without US assistance, to achieve a nuclear weapons capability could not fail to increase the likelihood that Pakistan would strive for a similar goal, possibly turning to Communist China for assistance. Such a development would in turn put more pressure on the UAR and Israel for nuclear arms. Similarly, were Japan to be treated as a special case, it is hard to believe that Germany and Italy would long rest content with remaining non-nuclear powers.

Arguments for a Universal Policy

McNamara decisively backs Gilpatric and ACDA, arguing “*that ‘selective proliferation,’ as he characterized the MLF, would prove impossible to control*” (Brands 2006, 98).

Washington, January 21, 1965.

A REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT BY THE COMMITTEE ON NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

Among ourselves there was also a diversity of opinions at the outset of our study. As a result of our study, however, the Committee is now unanimous in its view that preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons is clearly in the national interest despite the difficult decisions that will be required. We have concluded, therefore, that the United States must, as a matter of great urgency, substantially increase the scope and intensity of our efforts if we are to have any hope of success. Neces-

Committee Recommendations

Specific recommendations include:

- Nonproliferation treaty w/ Soviets.
- Comprehensive test ban treaty.
- Regional nuclear free zones.
- Limiting supply of nuclear technology.
- Security guarantees and sanctions to contain proliferation.
- Sharp limits to MLF.
- Opposition to British and French arsenals.
- Downgrade role of nuclear weapons in defense posture.

Committee Recommendations

Rationale for recommendations:

- Proliferation threatens U.S. geopolitically.
- U.S. effort had a good chance of success w/ Soviet help.
- Domino effects mean proliferation cannot be contained and nonproliferation must be evenly applied.

2. *The world is fast approaching a point of no return in the prospects of controlling the spread of nuclear weapons.* Nuclear power programs are placing within the hands of many nations much of the knowledge, equipment and materials for making nuclear weapons. The recent Chinese Communist nuclear explosion has reinforced the belief, increasingly prevalent throughout the world, that nuclear weapons are a distinguishing mark of a world leader, are essential to national security, and are feasible even with modest industrial resources. The Chinese Communist nuclear weapons program has brought particular pressure on India and Japan, which may both be approaching decisions to undertake nuclear weapons programs.

Although one might be tempted to accept Indian or Japanese nuclear weapons to counterbalance those of China, we do not believe the spread of nuclear weapons would or could be stopped there. An Indian or Japanese decision to build nuclear weapons would probably produce a chain reaction of similar decisions by other countries, such as Pakistan, Israel and the UAR. In these circumstances, it is unrealistic to hope that Germany and other European countries would not decide to develop their own nuclear weapons.

Policy Shifts

Indian interest in nuclear weapons helps convince USG that domino effects were happening and NPT needed.

McNamara, 1966: *“the growing pressures for proliferation in India indicates that we should reconsider our position on the nonproliferation treaty. I suggest that we consider language in our draft treaty which would make clear that the United States and other nuclear powers would each maintain a veto over its weapons.”*

Policy Shifts

June 1965: Johnson orders development of nonproliferation program.

By late 1966, agreement on NPT reached.

MLF is killed & replaced with Nuclear Planning Group, which substitutes joint consultation for joint control.

NPT opened for signature in 1968.

Alternative Explanations

Fears of allies becoming autonomous were present, but don't explain temporal change.

Many policymakers were willing to allow allies to acquire nuclear weapons but decided it could not be contained.

U.S. officials were worried about India acquiring nuclear weapons, but mostly because of what would come next:

1966: LBJ noted, *“the urgency of some action in connection with the possibility of India making a decision to go nuclear... this had great significance for the United States and the world and might, if India made such a decision, promote great instability in view of the fact that others would undoubtedly follow.”*

Conclusion

Beliefs about nuclear domino effects are central to the changing character of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Limitations/areas for future research:

Can be hard to tell whether domino fears → policy preferences or policy preferences → strategic use of domino arguments.

Does this hold for other states' nonproliferation policy?

More systematic theorizing and tests on the origins of nuclear domino fears.

Thanks!