POLITICS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

SUMMARY

Key Questions and Concepts

- Why study nuclear weapons?
- What have been the effects of nuclear weapons on the character of war?
- Why do states build nuclear weapons?
- What have been the effects of nuclear weapons on international security? Do nuclear weapons increase/decrease the intensity/frequency of war?
- Are nuclear weapons states more likely to engage in conflicts?

Definitions and Glossary

Deterrence by denial: according to Snyder, discouraging others from attacking by being able to repel such an attack.

Deterrence by punishment: deterrence through raising the cost of conflict to unacceptably high levels (Snyder). Second-strike nuclear forces achieve this objective (Waltz).

Nuclear threshold: the stage a state would be prepared to use nuclear weapons.

Effective deterrence: two main components—Waltz calls these the physical and psychological elements of deterrence; (1) a potential adversary perceives the existence of force capability and the state has (2) the general will to use that capability if necessary.

The Nuclear Revolution

Nuclear Weapons Change the Character of Warfare

- The speed and scale of the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons has led to the need to *avert* war between major powers (Brodie);
    - War could no longer be justified in the Clausewitzian sense as a continuation of politics by other means.
- The effect of this change, according to Jervis, includes;
    - The *impossibility of military victory* (disarming the enemy) between nuclear weapons powers because the costs of war for both sides are so high that they outweigh any possible gains. In contrast, when nuclear weapons are not concerned, the level of pain does not rise to sufficient levels to be totally unacceptable.
    - Even if some minor military victory were possible, it could not possibly achieve the political objectives of fighting the war.
- Jervis argues that because military victory is impossible, this has altered the utility of superior force in international relations. To this extent, Schelling argues that nuclear weapons have also affected a revolution in statecraft. It is now possible for states to achieve *political victory without military victory* through coercion.
    - Outcomes depend on how well one side uses the *threat of pain.*
    - The key tool of statecraft is the *manipulation of risk*.

        - Although the threat of nuclear weapons is not a credible deterrent, the uncertainty of escalation makes the deterrent threat credible. The adversary never knows how much risk will be accepted before the nuclear threshold is crossed.
- Schelling poses three strategies for making the deterrent threat more credible;
    - (1) automaticity: removing the element of human control
    - (2) the removal of other options
    - (3) the problem of chance: inducing an adversary into believing that the state will not behave rationally ('madman theory')
- The conclusion drawn from the nuclear revolution theory is that nuclear deterrence will hold and peace will ensue between major powers and the status quo will be relatively easy to maintain (Jervis).

Opponents of the Nuclear Revolution

- Those who disagree, do not argue that nuclear weapons are simply larger conventional weapons but that nuclear weapons can be understood through the intellectual frameworks that were developed when deterrence by denial prevailed (Jervis).
- Empirical arguments include;
    - The size of conventional capacities continues to increase, even though these are supposedly made obsolete by nuclear weapons
    - With the exception of China, the size of nuclear arsenals continues to expand above the minimum threshold required for deterrence

Why do States Build Nuclear Weapons?

Sagan outlined three models;

- Sagan focusses on the 'demand side' of nuclear weapons proliferation, asking why states want them and how the incentive structure can be changed
- Sagan argues for multi-causal explanations but these theories are not necessarily complimentary as they lead to different policy proscriptions

Threat model:

- A neorealist explanation that nuclear weapons ensure state survival in an anarchical system. If a state must protect itself from a nuclear armed adversary, then it has two options; (1) to proliferate or (2) to forge an alliance with a nuclear weapons power.
- This model has strong empirical value as explains the strategic chain reaction of nuclear weapons proliferation: 'proliferation begets proliferation'.
    - Eg USA – USSR – China – India – Pakistan etc
    - South Africa, and former Soviet states (Ukraine, Belarus) eliminated their nuclear weapons as they no longer faced existential threats to their survival

It is a parsimonious theory and its strength is in its predictive capacity (i.e the 'cascading trend') but it cannot explain why some states facing existential nuclear threats have not acquired nuclear weapons (eg South Korea, Japan) or *when* states will