

CORRESPONDENCE



Nuclear proliferation, preventive strikes, and the optimist-pessimist divide

In the latest issue of the *Nonproliferation Review*, Michael Cohen made a case for “optimistic pessimism” regarding the consequences of nuclear proliferation (23.3/4, June–July 2016, pp. 425–42), suggesting that “nuclear proliferation poses some dangers under some conditions, but the dangers are much weaker than usually assumed.” While we applaud the re-opening of the optimist-pessimist debate, we also believe that some of these arguments deserve further scrutiny.

This is particularly needed concerning Cohen’s central argument about the absence of preventive strikes against emerging nuclear arsenals. Cohen suggests that the pessimists have overestimated the effects of nuclear proliferation on the probability of international conflict. He points to the statistical study by Matthew Fuhrmann and Sarah Kreps to demonstrate that “almost 90 percent of states that have explored nuclear weapons have not been attacked.”¹ However, the empirical data also reveal another trend. As illustrated in a recent article by Vipin Narang, the proliferating state “experiences systematically *more* military conflict as it approaches the point of weaponization.”² This suggests that the closer states are to assembling the nuclear weapons, the more likely they are to end up in an armed conflict with another state.

The reason for the discrepancy between the two claims is simple: a preventive strike is usually considered a last-resort option, exercised only after alternatives—such as diplomatic intervention or economic sanctions—have been already exhausted. As such, preventive strikes do not usually take place in the nuclear exploration or “hedging” phases that Fuhrmann and Kreps include in their dataset. In fact, we may even argue that a reversed causality is taking place in this dynamic: many states likely remain in the exploration or hedging phases *particularly* because further steps toward nuclear capability may invite preventive strikes.

Cohen is also too optimistic in downplaying the fact that preventive strikes were seriously considered in multiple cases of proliferation. He suggests that “leaders and their associates seriously consider many things.” Furthermore, he recalls the Waltzian claim that states usually do not move from considering the strike to authorizing it because the attack would actually encourage the proliferator and strengthen his legitimacy *vis-à-vis* relevant audiences.³ However, in many cases, the preventive strike was not just one of many options under consideration, and it would likely be executed unless there were case-specific military factors at play. In some cases, the states considering a preventive strike did not execute it simply because the military planning had revealed the successful strike as unfeasible. This may well apply to the case of China and the Indian nuclear program.⁴ In other cases, the strike was ruled out only due to concerns about the proliferator’s military response. For example, the United States was deterred from striking China in the 1960s and North Korea in the 1990s by the threat of conventional retaliation

against US allies in the region.⁵ Similarly, the Soviets were probably deterred from preventively striking Chinese nuclear facilities by China's conventional capabilities rather than by concerns about legitimizing the Chinese nuclear program.⁶

Unfortunately, Cohen's article does not seem to provide any new convincing arguments that would advance the optimist (or "optimistic-pessimist") claim beyond pointing to the few cases of non-strikes. The optimist-pessimist divide is ultimately about the structural effects of nuclear proliferation on international security. When discussing preventive strikes, the pessimists generally suggest that nuclear proliferation, as a structural phenomenon, provides additional incentives for states to use force against each other. Whereas preventive strikes have so far been relatively rare, we believe that this historical record would only warrant optimism if the reasons for not striking were general and lasting. Since the few cases of proliferation turned out better than they might have does not make the big picture that much better.

To conclude, we would like to point to at least two contemporary developments which suggest that preventive strikes may actually become more feasible in the future. First, several scholars have noted that the ongoing technological "revolution in military affairs" makes the hardening and concealment of nuclear arsenals increasingly more difficult.⁷ Second, changes in the normative structure of international politics arguably make preventive attacks increasingly more acceptable from the general normative standpoint.⁸ Whether these developments will ultimately make preventive strikes more common in international politics remains an open question. However, we have little reason to believe that the future of nuclear proliferation entails less risk than its past.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge funding from the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, grant project VI20152019011.

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Buying nuclear restraint: risky business

When it comes to serious problems like preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons, policy practitioners are eager to avoid risks. Two recent articles in the *Nonproliferation Review*, "Market-based policies for nuclear nonproliferation" and "Atomic inducements: the case for buying out nuclear latency," (23.3–4, June–July 2016, pp. 409–24; 481–94) approach proliferation differently. They contend that the future success of nuclear nonproliferation may depend on two novel approaches. The first is to subsidize potentially dangerous nuclear activities, especially uranium enrichment, to make them so cheap that they might induce states not to bother to undertake these activities themselves. A related proposal is to use public resources to "impute value" to special nuclear materials, such as spent nuclear fuel, to assure they are handled properly. The second proposed approach is to