**Political Science 102: World Politics**

**Dr. Brad Nelson**

Lecture Outline: Nuclear Proliferation

I. Key Question: Should we be alarmed by the prospect of more states acquiring military nuclear technology/nuclear weapons?

A. Optimists say no, that more nuclear states isn’t necessarily a bad thing: as long as nuclear facilities and arsenals are hardened and managed w/good oversight, things should be fine; and in fact, additional nukes may even be a force for de-escalating or muffling conflicts

B. Pessimists say yes, that more nuclear states are a bad idea; there are too many pathways in which more nuke states lead to disaster, and that more nuke states is esp. terrible in today’s world filled a host of existing problems security problems and crises; hence, we must do everything we can to stop further proliferation

II. Optimists

A. Logic/Theory

1. Mutual Deterrence: Dyadic argument

a. Nuclear deterrence: Implicit or explicit threats to use nuclear weapons to prevent a country from doing something undesirable; was used during the cold war to avoid a hot war between the superpowers & is still relevant today

b. The logic: Concerns about high costs of using nukes and the presence of secure, invulnerable 2nd strike forces (underground bunkers, dispersed arsenals/facilities, dense population centers, all of which are properly managed & overseen) are the main factors preventing two nuclear states in a dispute from escalating their conflicts

c. Assumes leaders are rational

2. Nukes Induce Caution & Restrain a Country’s Foreign Policy: Monadic argument

a. The presence of just one nuclear state in a two-party dispute is sufficient to lower the likelihood of escalation of conflicts, rushing to war

b. Here, the idea is that the possession of nuclear weapons makes all states fairly responsible, cautious actors, regardless of who they’re engaging with in the world—they know full well that a spiraling conflict that gets out of hand could leave them to blame for the deaths of millions

3. Nuclear States Won’t Sell/Give Nukes to Other States/Terror Groups

a. Nuclear states typically work long and hard, and at great expense, to acquire nuclear technology—why help others cheat when they’ve invested so much of their own resources to achieve scientific breakthroughs?

b. Nuclear technology is often a source of national pride—are leaders really willing risk domestic blowback for a few bucks?

c. States also risk severe foreign diplomatic, economic and military backlash—inc. possible leadership decapitation—if caught dispensing nukes/nuclear technology to other states/groups

B. Empirical Evidence

1. Nukes have only been used twice, both by the same state (the US), and not at all since 1945: 70+ year record of no use of nukes on the battlefield, no nuclear wars, no accidental launches

2. Moreover, nukes are widely attributed as playing a role in keeping the peace between nuclear powers since WWII—arguably, the driving force behind the so-called "long peace"—as fears of mutually assured destruction have prevented great power conflicts from spinning out of control and into hot wars

3. As such, fears of deterrence breaking down is mostly fear-mongering & scare-tactics used by leaders for their own political ends

III. Pessimists

A. Non-Zero Probabilities

1. Everyone who studies nuclear weapons admits that the probability of a nuclear war is extremely low, almost zero.

2. But because nuclear weapons really do exist, the probably *IS NOT* zero.

3. And the death and destruction from the use of 1 nuclear weapon, whether intentional or accidental, would be catastrophic: likely hundreds of thousands would be immediately killed from the air blast (the explosion), up to as far as 100+ sq. miles out, and millions more over the hours, weeks, months, years ahead as the effects of radiation set in

4. There could also be terrible indirect impacts, such as via environmental disasters & blight: polluted waterways, devastated lands, a “nuclear autumn/winter,” etc., which could kill millions more via lack of access to clean water, famines, and a massive global cooling (dropping temps 25 degrees, making Earth about as cool as 1000+ years ago)

B. Crazy Leaders

1. An argument that’s popular in the media and among politicians, but far, far less prominent in the scholarly community

2. Challenges the rationality assumption of deterrence theory

3. This argument views leaders as irrational, suicidal, willing to bring themselves and their country down to achieve some political outcome

4. The punchline: Nuclear weapons might embolden some leaders, as they might be more willing to make extraordinarily risky gambles, believing that nuclear power makes them/their state mightier, even vis-a-via other nuclear powers; and of course there’s the fear that such leaders might even use nukes!

5. An argument w/a long history: Fears of Stalin, Mao, and in more recent times Iran’s Ahmadinejad and the Kim dynasty in North Korea

C. Rogue States

1. States that repeatedly violate widely accepted international rules, laws, and codes of behavior—internally and externally; modern-day Iran and North Korea, among others, are examples

2. Nukes in the hands of rogue states might be a problem

a. Such states are likely rational, able to pull back from the brink in crises, and forgo using nukes, but the problem is that they could use nuclear weapons as a protective shield, giving them cover, while they ramp up their undesirable behavior and activities—in other words, nukes might embolden states to act provocatively

b. Another issue here: Deterrence might be difficult to achieve—rogue states can make smaller, yet problematic and troublesome, moves that render deterrent threats meaningless—some leaders could be wily enough to irritate and threaten the international community, even using force at times, but at levels that would make the use of nuclear weapons as retaliation absurd

D. Nuclear Terrorism

1. The latest wave of nuclear states (Pakistan & North Korea) and aspiring nuclear states (Iran) have connections to terrorist groups/movements, which raises suspicions about the transfer of nuclear weapons technology/materials to terrorists; there is the possibility of terrorists stealing nuclear technology/materials from nuclear states; plus, it’s possible that rogue officials/scientists might work in cahoots with unsavory states and groups, passing on nuclear secrets to them—as in the case of AQ Kahn

2. Terrorists, esp. those hell-bent on causing death & destruction in the U.S. or against American interests, might use nukes—not only b/c it serves their interests (e.g., striking the US or Israel or any other perceived enemy), but b/c they are relatively unconstrained

3. Hard to deter terrorists: b/c they are elusive, mobile & often lack a fixed home turf, they have reduced fears to retaliation; where would the U.S. strike? And would the U.S. hold a country directly responsible?

E. Preventive Wars

1. In response to one country building nuclear facilities, another country—feeling insecure and threatened—will face strong temptations to strike at those things, wiping them out, before the arsenal gets too large to take out in one attack

2. These new nuclear facilities and capabilities must be detected and somewhat vulnerable to an attack; otherwise, what’s the point?

3. Examples: Israel in 1981 (Iraq) & 2007 (Syria); Contemporary worries: Israel engages in a preventive strike against Iran (if Iran does go nuclear) & the US, believing the only way to disarm NK is via force, launches a preventive strike before NK can threaten, harm the US homeland (or has that window closed already?)

4. Anytime the use of force is put into play there’s always the grave risk of destabilizing a country, an entire region—never know how a new nuclear country & its allies/friends might respond to an attack; plus, what if the 1st strike fails & the new nuclear state retains a residual or 2nd strike capability to hit back?

F. Nuclear Arms Racing

1. The idea is that if one country in a region goes nuclear, other countries, feeling insecure and vulnerable, will follow suit

2. Do we want a world in which multiple insecure countries—perhaps in different regions—are armed to the teeth?

3. Today, there are concerns about South Korea and Japan and Taiwan going nuclear in response to North Korea; additionally, there are concerns that should Iran go nuclear, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt might do the same

4. The problem, then, is that we could have multiple regions in which states are armed to the teeth w/nukes, and these are regions (Asia, the Middle East) that are already, to varying degrees, unstable, hostile and tense, rife with disputes

G. Close-Call Catastrophes

1. Optimists assume no flaws, no glitches, and no bad decisions when states possess/use/manage nuclear weapons/facilities—though that’s not likely over time

2. People make mistakes; leaders make wrong decisions; bureaucracies function ineffectively; workers are sometimes lazy; warning systems don’t always work

3. We already have a catalog of nuclear snafus and boneheaded moves that almost led to disaster; one day we might not be so lucky

IV. The Puzzling Case of North Korea

A. The Basics about North Korea

1. North Korea is the world’s newest nuclear power, officially going nuclear in 2006, though it had been experimenting since the 1950s with the help of the Soviets

2. Since 2006, North Korea has gone from experimentation to actually possessing anywhere from 30-75 nukes (roughly 10-15 of them are ICBMs)

3. North Korea is a weak, poor country, ruled by a tyrant Kim Jong Un, and it’s main lifeline to the world is via China (which supplies 90% of North Korean needs)

4. North Korea has long been suspicious of the US and has feared the US, a remnant of the Korean War, believing that it was a matter of time before the US forces came back to North Korea to try to topple the Kim dynasty and reunite the peninsula, with the south and Seoul in particular leading the way

5. North Korea has few friends, little $, and not much to offer the world; it’s nukes are the one piece of leverage it has in world politics and in its relations with the US

B. Diplomacy With North Korea

1. Under Bill Clinton, the US signed diplomatic deal with North Korea, called the 1994 Agreed Framework, though that was violated by North Korea and scrapped by the Bush administration

2. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq freaked out North Korea, which together with Iran and Iraq was labeled by America as a so-called axis of evil; arguably, it was around this time, in the mid-’00s, that a scared and insecure North Korea—fearing that it could be next on Bush’s list of countries to be invaded—ramped up its nuclear testing and eventually built a nuke

3. The strategies and policies of the Bush (GWB tried 6-party talks involving Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, NK, & US) and Obama (embraced “strategic patience”) governments went nowhere; both vocally supported denuclearization, but in practice embraced a combination of deterrence and containment, which didn’t force North Korea to disarm, allowed the problem to fester (North Korea’s nuclear program has grown and advanced over time), but kept North Korean foreign policy mostly in check

4. The Trump era has brought good and bad news

a. The good: Trump has met with Kim Jong Un three times and they seemed to have good rapport; after 2017, NK stopped nuclear testing and testing of ICBMs

b. The bad: Trump’s personal diplomacy didn’t lead to any kind of substantive behind the scenes diplomacy (which is where/how agreements are usually done); no US-NK nuclear agreement on Trump’s watch; North Korea is still advancing its nuclear arsenal, cranking out more nukes every month; and it has refined its ICBMs (they now, we believe, can hit all of the US)

5. What will Biden do?

a. Biden will likely revert back to Obama’s strategic patience, with a more concerted effort to get allies on board, given the central role that alliances will likely play in Biden’s foreign policy

6. Since 2006, when NK went nuclear, US administrations have preferred to kick the can down the road to his successor and hope for the best

C. What to do?

1. Lots of options on the table: denuclearization via negotiations; denuclearization via regime change/war; nuclear rollback (not completely disarm); nuclear freeze; let NK keep its arms & guard against use via containment/deterrence (“strategic patience”); let NK keep its arms but work with it via arms control agreements (Soviet model)

2. If solving the North Korea problem once and for all is the goal, then many of the above aren’t great options; the war options could lead to a second Korean war and millions of deaths, including millions of dead Americans (in Asia and in the US); denuclearization is widely considered too ambitious, too provocative, and is unlikely to succeed (see below); Less ambitious strategies and policies like a nuclear freeze, nuclear rollback, and deterrence/containment) are more likely to succeed, but also mean that NK gets to keep all or some of its arsenal

3. Denuclearization

a. It’s what the US wants and is unlikely to get—a complete shuttering of all North Korea’s military nuclear facilities and the destruction of all its nuclear weapons

b. No state with as advanced a nuclear program as North Korea has ever disarmed

c. No credible expert believes that North Korea will ever denuclearize: Nukes allow Kim to be a player in the world, help ensure the preservation of the Kim dynasty, protect North Korea’s sovereignty, and provide Kim with some governing legitimacy.

d. Moreover, having poor relations with the US and being on a war footing is a good thing for the Kim dynasty: ramping up the threat of the US and its allies to NK citizens, allows Kim to continue to clamp down on his country (repress citizens, banish political opponents, remove any traces of democracy, and be paranoid of outsiders, etc.)

4. What would you do?