Nuclear Blackmail: The Threat from North Korea and Iran*

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Introduction

In October 2006, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) conducted its first successful test of a nuclear device. In U.S. foreign policy circles, the conversation about North Korea's nuclear program underwent a marked shift. Having focused for more than a decade on preventing North Korea from acquiring a nuclear arsenal, the policy debate began to center around the consequences of having failed to achieve that objective. Now that North Korea had crossed the nuclear threshold, how would it use its newfound capability?

This question has become even more pressing as North Korea's nuclear capabilities have grown. In September 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth and largest nuclear test, which it claimed to be a thermonuclear device. U.S. intelligence agencies have estimated that North Korea has enough fissile material for between 30 and 60 nuclear warheads.[1] As its nuclear capabilities have expanded, so too has North Korea's ability to deliver nuclear weapons to faraway targets. Under President Kim Jong-un's leadership, North Korea has conducted more than 80 missile tests, including a test of a missile that could potentially place the entire continental United States within the range of North Korean nuclear forces.[2]

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[1] Kristensen and Norris (2018).
[2] Wright (2017).

What will North Korea try to do with its nuclear weapons? It is widely believed that at least one purpose of North Korea's nuclear arsenal is to deter an attack from the United States and protect the survival of the Kim regime. For their part, North Korean officials have long held that self-defense is the primary motivation for the country's nuclear program, asserting that "nuclear weapons will help DPRK avoid the fate of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria."[3]

But many observers believe that North Korea's objectives are much more ambitious. They argue that its aims are aggressive, not defensive, and that it plans to use nuclear threats to fracture the U.S. alliance with South Korea and Japan, undermine the U.S. military presence in East Asia, and even forcibly reunify the Korean peninsula under North Korean control.[4] During his tenure as CIA Director, for example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued that North Korea's nuclear weapons were meant for "more than just regime preservation. 'Coercive' is perhaps the best way to think about how Kim Jong-un is prepared to potentially use these weapons."[5] In this view, North Korea's nuclear arsenal gives it the ability to practice coercion and blackmail, not just deterrence.

Similar arguments have been made in recent debates about Iran. Iran does not possess nuclear weapons, but the growth of its uranium enrichment capability over the past decade fostered anxious speculation about how Iran might behave as a nuclear power. Would it simply seek to deter its adversaries, or would it attempt to intimidate and blackmail them into making concessions? Many observers fear the latter. As one Arab official reportedly put it, "What happens after Iran gets a nuclear bomb? The next day they will tell the king of Bahrain to hand over power to the opposition. They will tell Qatar to send the American Air Force home. And they will tell King Abdullah [of Saudi Arabia], 'This is how much oil you may pump and this is what the price of oil will now be.'"[6] A former high-ranking U.S. Defense Department official argued along similar lines: "A nuclear Iran would be disastrous for the countries of the region and for the United States?The Islamic Republic could be emboldened to act even more aggressively than it currently does in regional or global

[3]Mansourov (2014).

[4]Former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster made this argument during his time in the White House. See Jeffrey (2018).

[5]C-SPAN (2018).

[6]Quoted in Pollack (2013).

conflicts?Iran would extraordinarily increase its coercive leverage."[7]

These pessimistic projections reflect a broader view about the role nuclear weapons play in international relations. During the Cold War, most discussions about nuclear weapons in U.S. foreign policy revolved around their use as instruments of deterrence – preventing adversaries from attacking the United States or its allies. But deterring aggression is just one half of the equation. It is also possible that nuclear weapons might help countries commit aggression, not just prevent it. Nuclear-armed states might be able to coerce adversaries into giving up territory, changing their foreign policy, deposing a leader, or making other kinds of concessions by threatening nuclear attack. In other words, nuclear weapons might be useful instruments of coercion – for changing the status quo.

An emerging consensus today argues that nuclear weapons are effective weapons of coercion, not just deterrence. This "coercionist school" of nuclear politics holds that the threat of nuclear punishment can induce states not only to refrain from aggression, but also to make concessions that they would not otherwise make. As political scientist Robert Pape has argued, "Even if the coercer's nuclear resources are limited, the prospect of damage far worse than the most intense conventional assault will likely coerce all but the most resolute defenders."[8] The idea is simple: no state wants to suffer the terrifyingly destructive consequences of a nuclear attack. When confronted with a coercive demand backed by the threat of nuclear punishment, a leader has no choice but to back down, even if it means relinquishing something valuable.

The coercionist school has a long lineage in American foreign policy. At the very outset of the nuclear age, U.S. officials expressed optimism that the U.S. nuclear monopoly would allow it to bully the Soviets into accepting America's vision for the postwar world: "after all, we've got [the atomic bomb] and they haven't," boasted Harry Truman's Secretary of State, James Byrnes.[9] This belief has also underpinned fears about nuclear proliferation: in the 1960s, for example, U.S. officials worried that China's imminent acquisition of nuclear weapons would aid its efforts to

[7]Edelman et al. (2011, 28–29).

[8]Pape (1996, 38). Other examples of the coercionist school include Merrill and Peleg (1984); Beardsley and Asal (2009); Thayer and Skypek (2012).

[9]Truman (1955, 87).

"eject the United States from Asia" through coercion and intimidation.[10]

The policy implications of this perspective are stark: if nuclear weapons are indeed useful tools of coercion, then nuclear proliferation is not merely a threat to international stability – it is a threat to America's position in the world. North Korea might be emboldened to make "even greater demands and coercive nuclear threats,"[11] and a nuclear Iran could become "the dominant regional power in the Middle East," able to compel its adversaries to do its bidding.[12] Military action might be justified to avert these outcomes, as many have advocated.[13]

How well does the historical record support these views? Can new nuclear states more effectively impose their will on adversaries, either by threat or by force? In this chapter, we argue that the seemingly-straightforward logic of the coercionist school makes several logical and historical errors. In reality, coercive nuclear threats face a nearly-insurmountable credibility problem that stems from the fundamental distinction between deterrence and compellence. A close look at the evidence supports this view, suggesting that worst-case fears about nuclear coercion from North Korea and Iran are not warranted.

Compellence and the Nuclear Credibility Gap

"The aggressor is always peace-loving," wrote the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. "He would prefer to take over our country unopposed."[14] Clausewitz's insight reminds us that coercion is most successful when military force is not used at all: winning without a fight is the coercer's ideal outcome.

Before resorting to costly military action, North Korea and Iran might use coercive threats to pursue aggressive or expansionist foreign policy aims. North Korea, for example, could demand the partial or complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea. Iran could demand that its neighbors refuse basing or overflight rights to U.S. forces. In both cases, these demands might be accompanied by nuclear threats.

[10]U.S. Department of Defense, Office of International Security Affairs (1964, 4).
[11]Payne (2018).
[12]Sanger (2006).
[13]For example, see Bolton (2018); Rovere (2017); Luttwak (2018).
[14]Clausewitz (1832 [1976], 370).

Thomas Schelling coined the term "compellence" to describe threats aimed at changing the status quo.[15] Compellent threats are distinct from deterrent threats, which aim to prevent an adversary from taking action. Demands to relinquish territory, to withdraw troops, to change national policies, or to abdicate from power all fall under the umbrella of compellence. Is a North Korea – or, perhaps someday, Iran – better positioned to make compellent threats because of its nuclear capability?

In our book *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, we evaluated the coercionist school's assertion that compellent threats are more effective when they are made by countries wielding nuclear weapons.[16] We utilized a comprehensive database of more than 200 compellent threats to determine whether nuclear-armed coercers achieve their goals more often without resorting to war.[17] The database contained well-known cases of attempted compellence (e.g., U.S. threats during the Cuban missile crisis), as well as more obscure episodes. Moreover, it contained threats made by both nuclear and non-nuclear coercers. By comparing their success rates, we sought to reveal the utility – or futility – of nuclear coercion.

The evidence suggests that nuclear weapons offer few advantages for coercers hoping to use threats to alter the status quo. Three patterns stand out. First, compellent threats are not more successful when they are made by nuclear powers: in our database of compellent threats, roughly 20% of threats from nuclear states succeeded, compared to 32% for non-nuclear states.[18] Second, having nuclear "superiority" does not improve the effectiveness of compellent threats: states with larger nuclear arsenals than their adversaries succeeded just 20% of the time, versus 32% for states that did not.[19] Third, targeting adversaries that lack the ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons does not improve the odds of success: nuclear coercers compiled just a 16% success rate against non-nuclear adversaries, while other types of threats clocked in at 33%. This evidence is not encouraging for North Korean or Iranian officials who believe that

[15] See Schelling (1966, 69–91).

[16] Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017c).

[17] Sechser (2011).

[18] Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017c, 84–85). The overall result remains similar if we loosen the definition of a successful compellent threat; see Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017a).

[19] In a different article, we repeated these tests using several different definitions of nuclear "superiority," but the findings were the same. See Sechser and Fuhrmann (2013).

nuclear weapons will give them a trump card to wield against recalcitrant neighbors.[20]

Why are nuclear weapons such poor tools of compellence? Answering this question requires understanding how compellence differs from its counterpart, deterrence. Deterrent threats are often credible because they aim to protect what a nation already owns. Not only are the stakes often very high in deterrence – rising even perhaps to the level of national survival – but the secondary political costs of using nuclear weapons for deterrence are minimal, since self-defense is widely seen as a legitimate justification for using extreme military measures. It requires no mental gymnastics to imagine, for example, that North Korea or a nuclear Iran would be willing to use nuclear weapons to repel an invader.

Compellent threats, however, are different. Because they aim to alter the status quo, compellent threats necessarily center around objects or issues that the coercer covets but does not possess – and may never have possessed. In other words, the coercer has already demonstrated that it can live without its demands being met, even if it would prefer not to. This fact might not be problematic if the costs of using nuclear weapons for compellence were minimal. However, this is unlikely to be the case. Using nuclear threats – to say nothing of actual nuclear strikes – to extract concessions from an adversary would entail significant drawbacks for would-be coercers. A nuclear coercer could find itself isolated, targeted by crippling international sanctions, or even subject to attack by a coalition that feared becoming its next victim.[21] In short, compellence entails higher costs and lower stakes for coercers, both of which weaken the credibility of coercive nuclear threats.

This logic calls into question the intrinsic credibility of a coercive nuclear threat from North Korea or Iran. One could envision a scenario by which North Korea demanded that South Korea stop hosting U.S. troops, while making thinly-veiled references to its nuclear arsenal to underscore the threat. Were Iran to acquire nuclear weapons in the future, perhaps it could demand something similar of its neighbors. Yet it would be difficult to believe these threats. Simply issuing them – to say nothing of carrying them out – would drive countries deeper into the arms of the United States, other regional powers, and one an-

[20] Acquiring long-range ballistic missiles, as North Korea appears to have done, has not historically improved coercive outcomes. See Sechser (2018).

[21] We elaborate these and other potential costs in Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017c).

other. North Korea and Iran would find themselves more isolated and their adversaries more unified. Given that both countries have been able to live with U.S. troops nearby for decades, it would be difficult to believe that they had suddenly, precipitously reached a breaking point that made them willing to suffer dire costs in order to evict the Americans from their respective neighborhoods.

In nuclear confrontations, credibility is both essential and elusive. But the historical record demonstrates that using nuclear weapons to deter aggression is easier than using them to engage in it. Even if North Korean or Iranian leaders are emboldened to try to overturn the status quo with coercive threats, nuclear weapons are unlikely to play a role in their success or failure.

Nuclear Shields and Territorial Aggression

The preceding discussion underscores that explicit attempts at nuclear blackmail are likely to fail. However, there is a subtler way – one that does not involve verbal ultimatums – in which nuclear powers might be able to impose their will on other countries. A revisionist state armed with nuclear weapons could seize a slice of disputed territory without warning and force its adversary to fight in order to reverse the aggressor's gains. Fighting would be risky, based on this line of thinking, because it could lead to nuclear escalation. Having nuclear weapons, then, might enable countries to engage in territorial aggression with greater ease. Are nuclear arsenals akin to large shields that protect countries from retaliation following aggressive maneuvers?

We examined the connection between nuclear arsenals and territorial aggression in *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*. Using a database that contains information on 348 territorial disputes in the twentieth century – including prominent cases like the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan – we studied the history of nuclear-backed aggression.[22] Our approach was simple: we compared whether nuclear powers behaved differently or experienced more favorable outcomes than their non-nuclear counterparts when relying on military force to settle territorial disputes. We found that they did not. In general, concerns about nuclear weapons facilitating territorial *faits accomplis* are overblown.

[22]Huth and Allee (2002).

First, nuclear-armed countries and non-nuclear states initiate military challenges over territory at a similar rate. For both groups, fighting occurs in six percent of the relevant opportunities. Nuclear powers do sometimes use military force in an attempt to overturn the status quo. For example, the Soviet Union provoked a confrontation with the United States and its allies over the status of Berlin from 1958 to 1961. And Russia challenged Georgia militarily during a dispute over military basing rights in the 1990s. But non-nuclear states fight over territory with the same frequency, suggesting that nuclear weapons do not generate unique emboldening effects.

Second, nuclear weapons do not appear to embolden countries to engage in conventional escalation during ongoing military conflicts. The nuclear coercionst school implies that countries will push harder during confrontations when they have a nuclear advantage, but history tells a different story. In our database, nuclear-armed challengers escalated disputes in just four of their twenty-one opportunities to do so. These four episodes all occurred in the context of a single case: China's border dispute with Vietnam. Non-nuclear challengers actually escalated at a slightly higher rate (24 percent compared to 19 percent).

Third, nuclear powers rarely succeed when they use military force in an attempt to redraw the map. We examined the outcomes of all cases in our database in which nuclear-armed challengers instigated military disputes. There were twenty-three such episodes of conflict across seven territorial disputes. Our analysis reveals that seventy percent of the time military force failed to produce major territorial gains for the nuclear power. Proponents of the "nuclear shield" argument often point to Pakistan as a case that illustrates the utility of nuclear weapons for territorial aggression.[23] Pakistan has indeed instigated military challenges in the context of the Kashmir dispute, but it has little to show for its efforts. Islamabad's 1999 gambit to surreptitiously seize land in the mountainous Kargil region of Kashmir, for instance, did not result in any territorial gains.

These findings carry lessons for contemporary policy debates. U.S. officials on both sides of the aisle worry that Iran would use nuclear weapons as a shield for aggression if it were to obtain an arsenal. For example, Colin Kahl, who served as deputy assistant to the U.S. president and national security to the vice president from 2014 to 2017, wrote

[23]See, for example, Kapur (2007).

that if it built nuclear weapons, "Tehran would likely dial up its trouble-making and capitalize on its deterrent to limit the response options available to threatened states."[24] Robert Danin, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, expressed similar fears, arguing that "Iran's nuclear capability could lead it to use its conventional military forces more aggressively."[25] There is some merit to these concerns. However, the possibility of Iran engaging in nuclear-backed aggression is less threatening than it might initially appear.

The "nuclear shield" argument assumes that getting nuclear weapons emboldens states to do things that they otherwise would not. However, countries tend to behave similarly, at least when it comes to territorial aggression, once they get nuclear weapons. Proponents of the view that nuclear weapons induce aggression often point to actions Iran might take if it gets a nuclear bomb, such as supporting Shiite extremist groups like Hezbollah or threatening to escalate territorial disputes with neighboring countries.[26] But Tehran is already doing these things as a non-nuclear state. It is far from obvious that getting nuclear weapons would lead to an overall increase in Iranian aggression, as opposed to continuation of its present policies.

This brings us to the question of effectiveness. Could Iran alter the status quo in its favor through nuclear-backed *faits accomplis*? Our analysis suggests that it could not. Other revisionist leaders have had little luck using threats of nuclear retaliation to swipe territory or other valuable objects from their adversaries. It is hard to see why Iran would have a different fortune.

The Soviet experience offers a valuable illustration. In 1962, Nikita Khrushchev introduced nuclear missiles in Cuba. He intended to present the United States with a *fait accompli*. As Khrushchev instructed the Presidium: "Carry this out secretly. Then declare it."[27] Once these capabilities were revealed, the United States would face a stark choice: accept the new status quo or use military force to reverse it. Khrushchev seemingly believed that his nuclear arsenal would compel Washington to choose the latter. Unfortunately for Khrushchev, his operation did not go according to plan. His actions triggered the Cuban missile crisis, which

[24]Kahl and Waltz (2012, 158).
[25]Danin (2012).
[26]For example, see Maloney (2013).
[27]Quoted in Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017c, 207).

brought the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war and ended in a humiliating defeat for Moscow. These events underscore that nuclear-backed aggression can be exceedingly dangerous and does not ultimately benefit those who attempt it.

Timing matters when it comes to nuclear-backed aggression. A 2009 study by the political scientist Michael Horowitz shows that nuclear powers behave more aggressively than non-nuclear states – but only in the first few years that they possess an arsenal.[28] It would not be surprising if a nuclear-armed Iran followed this pattern. Tehran may attempt to employ its arsenal as a shield shortly after becoming a nuclear power. Over time, though, Iran is likely to learn a valuable lesson: nuclear backed *faits accomplis* do not pay off.

Nuclear Coercion and Preventive War

The preceding analysis carries implications for U.S. nonproliferation policy. It may help officials better understand the options that they should (or should not) pursue in order to counter the international spread of nuclear weapons.

One option in the nonproliferation toolkit is preventive strikes against an adversary's nuclear facilities. The goal of this policy is to eliminate critical infrastructure, thereby eroding a state's capacity to make bombs. This option has a rich history. Countries have seriously considered attacking enemies' nuclear plants no fewer than 18 times.[29] Some of these cases resulted in actual preventive strikes. Israel, for instance, carried out two prominent attacks in the name of nonproliferation – one against Iraq in 1981 and another that targeted Syria in 2007. Preventive strikes are a potential option for dealing with the nuclear challenges posed by Iran and North Korea today. There are signs that President Donald Trump favors such an approach.

President Trump withdrew from the nonproliferation agreement with Iran known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on May 8, 2018. This led to speculation about the possible use of military force against Tehran. John Bolton, Trump's current national security advisor, has been a vocal proponent of this option. His 2015 op-ed in the

[28] Horowitz (2009).

[29] Fuhrmann and Kreps (2010).

New York Times had the title "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran." Trump himself has hinted at the possibility of attacking Iran. He threatened Iranian president Hassan Rohani in a July 22, 2018 tweet: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Trump has similarly raised the prospect of war with North Korea. In August 2017, he threatened to unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen" against Pyongyang. Ten months later, he met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore during a historic summit. The two leaders released a statement shortly after their meeting in which Pyongyang pledged to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."[30] Yet many people doubt that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons. After all, the Singapore declaration represents a vague, open-ended commitment – not an ironclad promise to unilaterally disarm, as some people interpret it. Trump is reportedly frustrated by North Korea's lack of progress on disarmament.[31] The prospect of military force looms in the background if North Korea continues to dig in its heels.

Advocates of preventive strikes often accept the nuclear coercionist take on blackmail. A nuclear-armed Iran or North Korea, they argue, can bully the world into submission. In an article titled "The Case for Bombing Iran," one observer argued that an Iranian nuclear capability would allow it to "dominate the greater Middle East, and thereby to control the oilfields of the region and the flow of oil out of it through the Persian Gulf," simply through the use of "intimidation and blackmail."[32] The only way to avoid being victimized by Iran, advocates of preventive war argue, is to attack its nuclear facilities before it's too late.

If nuclear weapons enable aggression and victimization – not merely self-defense – preventive strikes against nuclear programs may be warranted in some situation. Our analysis shows, however, that they generally do not. This substantially weakens the argument in favor of military strikes against Iran or North Korea. There are, in fact, many undesirable effects associated with nuclear proliferation. For instance, the further spread of nuclear weapons increases the risk of nuclear use due to acci-

[30] The full text of the statement is available here.
[31] Sang-Hun (2018).
[32] Podhoretz (2007).

dents or miscalculation. But worst-case thinking about contemporary proliferators is badly misguided, and potentially dangerous.

Conclusion

The fear of nuclear blackmail permeates international politics. World leaders worry that their adversaries will bully them into submission by dangling nuclear threats. They also fear that a nuclear-armed rival could use their arsenal to commit aggression with greater ease. Both of these concerns are largely unfounded. Nuclear weapons have great utility in some situations – particularly when it comes to defending the homeland against invasions. But they are poorly suited for changing the status quo. Coercive nuclear threats lack credibility because they would be too costly for the coercer to implement in most situations. There is little evidence that nuclear powers are systematically more aggressive than their nonnuclear counterparts. When nuclear-armed countries have attempted daring land-grabs or other *faits accomplis*, they have often failed.

Nuclear proliferation is by no means desirable for the United States. Yet officials in Washington would do well to consider the coercive limitations of nuclear weapons when crafting U.S. nonproliferation policies. In many circumstances, it may be wiser to reach for diplomatic and economic tools than military ones.

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