

# The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons

Alexandre Debs (with Nicholas Anderson and Nuno P. Monteiro)  
Department of Political Science, Yale University



## Research Question

**What are the benefits of nuclear acquisition?**

## Introduction

Recent literature focuses on the role of nuclear possession, posture, and superiority in determining the incidence and outcome of interstate crises, using quantitative methods (Sechser and Fuhrmann 2013, Kroenig 2013, Narang 2014).

Studying interstate crises gives a narrow and biased perspective on interstate relations. There can be important changes to interstate relations before the occurrence of a crisis.

Quantitative studies typically give scant evidence of the causal mechanisms through which nuclear weapons affect interstate relations.

## Materials and Methods

This paper uses qualitative evidence and archival evidence in four cases around the time of nuclearization (starting 10 years prior to nuclearization and ending 10 years after nuclearization).

We look at changes in the proliferant's relations with the United States.

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## Argument

We distinguish between the *military* and the *political* effects of nuclear weapons.

military effect: effect on warfighting, and depends on power and allied commitment (Debs and Monteiro 2014)

political effect: effect on interstate relations

- deterrence and/or coercion the enemy;
- greater commitments from an ally; and
- greater foreign policy autonomy.

The political effect is large only if the military effect is large.

Table 1: The Political Effect of Nuclear Weapons: Theoretical Prediction

		Ex ante Level of Allied Commitment	
		High	Low
Ex ante Balance of Power	High	---	Low effect
	Low	Moderate effect	High effect

## Cases

We study the development of United States relations with:

- South Africa (1966-1989), a loose ally that enjoyed a favorable balance of power vis-à-vis its enemy;
- Israel (1956-1976), a loose ally that was relatively weak vis-à-vis its enemies;
- China (1955-1974), an enemy, loosely allied with the Soviet Union, that was weak vis-à-vis its enemies;
- France (1950-1970), a strong ally that was weak vis-à-vis its enemy.

Table 2: The Political Effect of Nuclear Weapons: Empirical Record

		Ex ante Level of Allied Commitment	
		High	Low
Ex ante Balance of Power	High	---	South Africa
	Low	France	Israel, China

## Conclusion

It is important to evaluate the size and nature of the political effects of nuclear weapons when devising non-proliferation and counter-proliferation policies.

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## Contact Information

Email address: alexandre.debs@yale.edu