

CHAPTER 6

After Armageddon: The Potential Political Consequences of Third Use

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Nuclear weapons have thankfully not been used in war since 1945. The nonuse of the world's most destructive weapon for 70 years makes it tempting to conclude that nuclear weapons are relics of a bygone era. The possibility of another nuclear attack, according to this line of thinking, is remote. This view may be correct—and hopefully it is—but there is some cause for pessimism. Several alarming incidents during the Cold War brought the Soviet Union and the United States to the brink of nuclear war: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev threatened to unleash nuclear attacks if Western forces did not withdraw from West Berlin during crises in 1958-59 and 1961; an American U-2 spy plane accidentally ventured into Soviet airspace during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962; the United States ordered DEFCON 3, thereby placing nuclear forces on alert, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War to deter Soviet involvement in the conflict; and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise, known as Able Archer 83, caused the Soviet Union to make preparations for nuclear war in 1983.

The world remains a dangerous place in the post-Cold War era. It does not take too much imagination to envision a scenario in which nuclear weapons could be used in today's environment. India and Pakistan threatened nuclear escalation during the 1999 Kargil War, and again following the 2001 Indian parliament attack. A future

Indo-Pakistani crisis could spiral out of control, leading to an accidental or intentional nuclear exchange. North Korea has made multiple nuclear threats since its first nuclear test in 2006. If backed into a corner, a desperate Kim Jung-un may carry out his threat to turn Seoul into a fireball. There have been three serious crises in the Taiwan Strait involving China and the United States—in 1954-55, 1958, and 1995. A fourth crisis, if it occurs, could escalate to a dangerous level.

Thinking about nuclear war scenarios is unpleasant. Indeed, it is depressing to imagine an event that could cause such widespread death and destruction. Studying this subject takes us into the “dark side” of international relations.¹ Uncomfortable as it may be, it is important to consider what might happen if nuclear weapons are used for a third time. How might nuclear use change the world in which we live?

Little scholarly literature in political science addresses this question. On one hand, it is easy to see why this is the case. Everyone understands that a nuclear attack has the potential to inflict catastrophic damage, possibly wiping entire countries off the map. Any additional political consequences seem trivial when compared to the human costs of nuclear war. Most scholarly thinking, therefore, has been devoted to the causes of war in the nuclear age. We seek to understand why wars occur and when nuclear deterrence might fail, in part, to offer guidance on how countries can further reduce the danger of armed conflict in the shadow of nuclear weapons.² This is perfectly reasonable, and I have framed some of my own

1. This phrase is borrowed from Robert Pape, who characterizes the study of military coercion as “the dark side of international relations.” Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3.

2. As Ronald Krebs writes, “the field’s overriding concern was how to prevent a catastrophe in which millions would perish. This understandable focus on the causes of war came at the expense of research into its consequences.” Ronald Krebs, “In the Shadow of War: The Effects of Conflict on Liberal Democracy,” *International Organization* 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009): 177-210.

research along these lines.³

However, there is value in thinking through the possible political effects of the third use of nuclear weapons. First, this exercise can help us better understand a key puzzle in international relations: Why haven't nuclear weapons been used since 1945?⁴ Part of the answer has to do with the human costs of a nuclear attack, but this cannot be the full story. A nuclear detonation in a large city could kill several hundred thousand civilians, but one can also imagine a nuclear use scenario in which few people die. One military advantage of nuclear bombs is that they can destroy "hardened" targets more effectively than conventional weapons. The United States, in theory, could launch a nuclear attack against a remote weapons of mass destruction (WMD) facility in the middle of a desert where there are few, if any, civilians for miles.⁵ Such an attack may not kill any more people than a conventional strike would. Why have countries not used nuclear weapons in this type of scenario? We can more fully appreciate this issue by delving deeper into the political costs of nuclear attacks. As this chapter will show, the third use of nuclear weapons carries significant costs for the attacker, even if few people are killed as a result.

Second, from a policy standpoint, we risk underestimating the costs of nuclear use if we neglect the possible political consequences. Few credible analysts would suggest that a nuclear attack would

3. See, for example, Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, No. 4 (October 2014): 919-935.

4. Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

5. This is similar to a scenario discussed in Daryl Press, Scott Sagan, and Benjamin Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review* 107, No. 1 (February 2013): 188-206.

not be costly. But significant costs may be “hidden,” especially in cases where a country is not directly involved in nuclear use, either as the attacker or the target. The analysis that follows reveals that there are significant political risks associated with the third use of nuclear weapons. Once we take stock of these consequences, nuclear use seems even more cataclysmic than when we focus on the human costs alone.

This chapter considers the possible political ramifications of the bomb’s third use. Lacking crystal balls, it is impossible to know for sure how world politics might change following a nuclear attack. Reaching definitive conclusions about something that has not happened is exceedingly difficult, and this inevitably requires a fair amount of speculation. This chapter does not intend to predict the future. It instead has three main goals: (1) to identify some of the conceivable political consequences of nuclear use; (2) to discuss variables that are likely to shape the degree to which these costs materialize; and (3) to comment on what my analysis teaches us about the role of nuclear weapons in world politics. The sections that follow address these issues in turn.

Potential Political Effects of the Third Use of Nuclear Weapons

This section considers some of the possible consequences of a nuclear attack. Before proceeding, some key points warrant further clarification. I focus on the political effects of nuclear use, largely leaving aside the numerous humanitarian, social, environmental, and economic consequences that would no doubt arise from a nuclear strike. Non-political issues associated with nuclear use are critically important, but they fall outside the scope of this particular chapter. Additionally, my analysis centers on the possible third use of nuclear weapons. The bomb’s third use could lead to unrestrained nuclear warfare, but this chapter is not designed to assess the consequences of nuclear holocaust scenarios. Nuclear escalation is one conceivable consequence of a nuclear attack, and I dis-

cuss this possibility below, but I do not strive to comprehensively analyze the political consequences of total nuclear war.

The list of political costs that could arise from nuclear use is practically endless. I focus on some of the most significant consequences, grouping them into four main categories: (1) military escalation and the diffusion of armed conflict, (2) political blowback for the nuclear user, (3) damage to the nonproliferation regime, and (4) erosion of democracy. All of the consequences discussed below could plausibly result from a nuclear attack. This does not imply, however, that they would automatically materialize.

Military Escalation and the Diffusion of Armed Conflict

The third use of nuclear weapons could ignite an ongoing military conflict. Whether nuclear use leads to further military escalation depends, in part, on how the target state responds. If the target also possesses a nuclear arsenal, there would be significant pressure to launch a retaliatory nuclear strike. The third use of nuclear weapons, then, could quickly lead to the fourth use. After that, the conflict could escalate from limited to total nuclear war. Of course, even if the target has the capacity to strike back with its arsenal, nuclear retaliation is by no means guaranteed. The target may instead choose to launch a stiff conventional response, or surrender and not respond at all.⁶ However, there is a non-trivial danger that using nuclear weapons could lead to unrestrained military escalation.

The level of escalation may depend on actors other than the nuclear user and the target. Nuclear use could pull other countries, especially powerful ones, into an ongoing war. During the Cold War, most of the plausible nuclear attack scenarios involved the United States and the Soviet Union. The situation is different to-

6. A target contemplating retaliation with nuclear weapons would have to weigh the benefits of attacking against the costs. A state might choose not to strike back with atomic weapons, for instance, if it believed that doing so would cause it to suffer further nuclear punishment, especially if the issue at stake was non-vital.

day: Many dangerous flashpoints in the world center on disputes between regional powers, like India and Pakistan. When regional powers armed with nuclear arsenals fight, there is often significant pressure on other countries to intervene. During the 1999 Kargil War, for example, the United States actively sought to prevent nuclear escalation. After U.S. intelligence detected the movement of Pakistani nuclear weapons, President Bill Clinton warned Pakistani leader Nawaz Sharif not to launch a nuclear attack, and this may have helped bring an end to the conflict. If a regional nuclear power followed through on an atomic threat, it would likely be difficult for the United States to remain on the sidelines. Washington may decide to intervene militarily, to deter further nuclear escalation. The prospect of suffering military punishment at the hands of a superpower may de-escalate a war, as it did in the case of Kargil.

Yet superpower intervention could further escalate tensions. Should the United States join a limited nuclear war, the American arsenal could be on the table. Pressure might mount, especially if there were high casualties for U.S. forces, to launch retaliatory nuclear strikes against the initial nuclear user. Imagine, for the sake of illustration, that North Korea launched a surprise nuclear attack against Japan or South Korea. The United States may intervene to defend its allies. If it did, Washington would surely prefer to prevail using conventional military power only. However, if the conflict persisted, some may come to believe that America could not “win”—at least not at an unacceptable cost—by continuing to fight at the conventional level. The end result, if this kind of thinking prevailed, could be an American nuclear response. Not only does this stylized example illustrate how superpower intervention could intensify an ongoing war, it also underscores that the third use of nuclear weapons might lead to nuclear retaliation even if the target is nonnuclear.

There are other, less obvious ways that a nuclear attack could lead to the further spread of military conflict. Research shows that war

undermines public health.⁷ Armed conflict can expose individuals to conditions that are conducive to the spread of disease, reduce the resources available for public health, and destroy critical infrastructure, like hospitals. One can imagine that the third use of nuclear weapons might create a severe public health crisis in the target country. Hundreds of thousands of civilians could be killed or injured, and medical help might not be readily available. The public health emergency that would likely ensue from a nuclear attack, combined with widespread panic in the civilian population, could undermine stability in the target country, potentially raising the risk of political violence or civil war.

The environmental consequences of a nuclear attack could also fuel instability in the target. A rich literature suggests that environmental degradation increases the risk of conflict, in part, by causing resource scarcity.⁸ A nuclear attack would severely damage the surrounding environment, potentially rendering large portions of land uninhabitable. Moreover, food and water supplies could be contaminated. People may believe that it is unsafe to consume resources from the target, even if the food supply is unaffected by the nuclear blast, leading to further resource shortages. All of this could provoke a competition over scarce resources, potentially breeding conflict or civil war in the target country.

Chaos in the target state could have consequences for neighboring states, too. War is known to create refugee problems. As a result of the ongoing Syrian Civil War, for instance, more than 2 million civilians have fled Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and elsewhere. Individuals may flee conflict zones because their homes are de-

7. See, for example, Hazem Adam Ghobarah, Paul Huth, and Bruce Russett, "Civil Wars Kill and Maim People—Long After the Shooting Stops," *American Political Science Review* 97, No. 2 (May 2003): 189-202; and Zaryab Iqbal, *War and the Health of Nations* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

8. Henrik Urdal, "People vs. Malthus: Population Pressure, Environmental Degradation, and Armed Conflict Revisited," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, No. 4 (July 2005): 417-434.

stroyed or due to concerns about their future safety. In any case, massive refugee flows can have significant political consequences. Most notably, the presence of refugees from neighboring states increases the likelihood that a country will experience political turmoil and armed conflict.⁹ A nuclear attack could produce a similar sequence of events on a larger scale.

Civilians in the target country could flee to neighboring states in droves. Many would leave due to the belief that radioactive fallout from a nuclear blast makes it unsafe to remain in the country. Others may flee, even if they live far from the blast site, because they fear additional nuclear attacks. Neighboring countries would probably be ill-equipped to take on massive refugee flows. At the very least, this could create a major humanitarian crisis. Consider what happened following the March 2011 accident at Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant. Widespread radioactive contamination forced many residents to flee the surrounding area. Two years after the disaster, there were still 83,000 nuclear refugees who were unable to return home.¹⁰ The large-scale movement of people following a nuclear attack could raise the risk of conflict in neighboring countries by sapping public resources, inciting ethnic tensions, or spreading fear and uncertainty. Anticipating the problems associated with taking on refugees on a large scale, potential host countries might deny entry to civilians from the target country. If this happens, refugees themselves might turn to violence, in a desperate attempt to gain sanctuary in a neighboring state.

The third use of nuclear weapons could also have long-term consequences for international conflict. It is widely believed that conflict begets conflict.¹¹ In other words, once two countries fight, they are

9. Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War," *International Organization* 60, No. 2 (Spring 2006): 335-366.

10. Martin Fackler, "Japan's Nuclear Refugees, Still Stuck in Limbo," *New York Times*, October 1, 2013; available from www.nytimes.com/2013/10/02/world/asia/japan-nuclear-refugees-still-stuck-in-limbo.html?_r=0.

11. See, for example, Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in Interna-*

more likely to experience future military disputes. War, therefore, can lead to a vicious cycle that is difficult to reverse. It is no accident, according to this perspective, that countries such as India and Pakistan fight repeatedly over similar issues. Why do many conflicts recur? Part of the answer is that armed conflict creates grievances and leads to resentment and distrust, which increases the likelihood of future conflict. For example, there is still bad blood between Japan and South Korea over atrocities committed by Imperial Japan during World War II. Today, due to persistent feelings of resentment, the leaders of these two countries are reportedly “barely on speaking terms.”¹² The use of nuclear weapons would likely result in widespread bitterness toward the nuclear user among individuals in the target country. As a result, once two countries fight a nuclear war, they are likely to fight again in the future. The consequences of nuclear use for international conflict, therefore, could persist long after fighting in the nuclear war stops. Nuclear use could severely exacerbate an existing interstate rivalry, or lead to the onset of a new one.

Political Blowback for the Nuclear User

The preceding discussion highlights some of the ways in which nuclear use could be damaging for international security. In this section, I focus on consequences that are unique to the nuclear user.¹³ I highlighted the most direct such cost above: The user could suffer nuclear or conventional retaliation from the target or from third parties. Yet the possible costs for the attacker do not end there.

tional Rivalry (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

12. Martin Fackler and Gho Sang-Hun, “A Growing Chill Between South Korea and Japan Creates Problems for the U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2013, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/world/asia/a-growing-chill-between-south-korea-and-japan-creates-problems-for-the-us.html>.

13. The discussion in this section draws partially on *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

A state that carried out the third use of nuclear weapons could experience other kinds political blowback.

A leader who carries out a nuclear attack could put his or her political future at risk. The third use of nuclear weapons would shatter a tradition of nuclear nonuse that has persisted for decades, a point that I will revisit in the subsequent section. Other countries are therefore likely to be threatened by the nuclear user's actions. They may seek to remove him or her from power through a foreign imposed regime change (FIRC). In the past, the United States has used FIRCs to punish leaders who pursued policies that were inimical to American interests. Washington covertly removed Mohammad Massaddegh from power in Iran during the 1950s and attempted to eliminate Cuban leader Fidel Castro on numerous occasions in the 1960s, to cite a couple of particularly infamous examples. The United States has also removed foreign leaders from power overtly, as in the case of Saddam Hussein during the 2003 Iraq War. It is not too hard to imagine that a leader who used nuclear weapons might suffer a similar fate. International actors may be unnecessary to remove the nuclear user from power. The use of nuclear weapons could incite domestic unrest, possibly triggering a domestic revolt that forces the nuclear user to step down.

Using nuclear weapons could complicate a state's relations with friendly nations. Countries often strain their alliance relationships when they take aggressive actions. For example, the United States was displeased when British and French troops invaded the Suez Canal zone in 1956. The Soviet Union was similarly alarmed when one of its protégés, North Korea, seized a U.S. military vessel known as the USS *Pueblo* in 1968. Alliances are particularly likely to become strained when there is the possibility of nuclear escalation. Many leaders in Western Europe were incensed by discussions of nuclear use in the United States during the Korean War (1953), the Indochina War (1954), and the Berlin crises (1958-59 and 1961). Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev likewise became deeply concerned when Fidel Castro privately advocated for preventive nuclear strikes against the United States during the Cuban Mis-

sile Crisis. As a result of this episode, Khrushchev believed that he could no longer trust Castro. When the crisis ended the Soviets removed their tactical nuclear weapons from Cuba (the existence of which the United States did not know at the time) that they initially intended to keep on the island. Castro's mercurial behavior thus cost him weapons that could have been vital to his security. The actual use of nuclear weapons could have profound effects on alliance relationships. Allies may turn their backs on the nuclear user or, at the very least, lose confidence in that state. The nuclear user may be left with few, if any, friends.

In addition to causing a state to lose friends, using nuclear weapons may create enemies. Other states may align against the nuclear user, seeking to contain that state in the long-term. Countries often form military alliances to counter common threats.¹⁴ As the old adage goes, an enemy of an enemy is a friend. Because other countries are likely to find a state that uses nuclear weapons highly threatening, they may unite against it by forging formal alliances. By ganging up on the nuclear user in an attempt to contain it, the international community would likely frustrate the user's ability to pursue its interests in the realm of foreign policy. Imagine if China used nuclear weapons in a future crisis with one of its regional rivals. That would likely change the way that many states perceive Beijing's intentions, causing them to be more wary of China's rise than they otherwise would be. Countries in Asia might therefore actively contain China, to meet what they perceive as a growing threat. In the end, China, a country whose grand strategy is based partially on the notion of a "peaceful rise," may end up worse off than it would have been in the absence of a nuclear attack.

The nuclear user could also become internationally isolated in other ways. Countries might levy harsh economic sanctions against that state or terminate commercial ties altogether. It is also conceivable that states might sever diplomatic relations, leaving the nuclear

14. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

user politically cut off from the rest of the world. Additionally, being labeled as a pariah could undermine a country's international influence.

Damage to the Nonproliferation Regime

The third use of nuclear weapons could undermine the nuclear nonproliferation regime. As noted above, there is a 70-year tradition of nuclear nonuse. Countries had opportunities to use nuclear weapons on a number of occasions, including some of those referenced above, but they refrained from doing so each time. In a few instances—notably the Vietnam War and the Soviet-Afghan War—nuclear powers accepted defeat before using their nuclear arsenals. The persistent absence of nuclear use has led to the creation of a “nuclear taboo.”¹⁵ This taboo brings stability to world politics by giving states greater confidence that they will not be subjected to unprovoked nuclear attacks. The third use of nuclear weapons, however, could shatter the nuclear taboo.

Using nuclear weapons for a third time might set a dangerous precedent—namely, that it is acceptable to use atomic bombs to resolve interstate disputes.¹⁶ By changing the rules of the game, nuclear use could make future nuclear attacks more likely. To illustrate, consider how the use of nuclear weapons during the 1982 Falklands War might have affected the nuclear taboo. Britain carried nuclear weapons—specifically nuclear depth bombs—to the South Atlantic after Argentina occupied the disputed Falkland Islands. What if Britain had used one of those bombs, either intentionally or accidentally? Some may find this possibility farfetched, but if it had happened, it may have changed the way that countries

15. Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*.

16. Scott Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in Sohail Hashemi and Steven Lee, eds., *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

thought about nuclear weapons. Up until that point, the bomb had not been used in war for 37 years, contributing to the perception that “responsible” countries do not use such a destructive weapon. However, if Britain had broken the nuclear taboo, other nuclear powers might have believed that they too could use atomic weapons. Nuclear arsenals, then, may have come to play a bigger role in world politics. This brings me to a related point.

Nuclear use may foment nuclear proliferation. One effective nonproliferation strategy is to make the world think that nuclear weapons are utterly useless. If having a nuclear arsenal provides no benefits, why would anyone want to build one? The third use of nuclear weapons could cultivate the opposite perception—that possessing the bomb allows one to get their way in international relations. This was one unintended consequence of the nuclear attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time, most observers believed that using nuclear weapons helped the United States end the Pacific War on favorable terms.¹⁷ This perception fueled widespread interest in nuclear weapons, particularly in the Soviet Union. If nuclear weapons are again seen as useful for coercing other states, interest in atomic arsenals could spike globally.

The preceding logic assumes that states desire nuclear weapons for offensive diplomatic purposes. Yet nuclear arsenals are useful primarily for defense.¹⁸ Even status quo oriented countries, then, might seek nuclear weapons following their third use. Those states might do so to protect themselves from nuclear blackmail or nuclear attacks. History shows that countries sometimes launch nuclear weapons programs after they are faced with perceived nuclear threats. During the 1950s, for instance, the United States

17. Scholars continue to debate the role that the U.S. atomic bombings played in ending the Pacific War. See Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (New York: Belknap Press, 2006); and Richard Frank (Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire, New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

18. Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*.

brandished its nuclear arsenal in two crises with China in the Taiwan Strait. This caused officials in Beijing to believe that they were vulnerable to U.S. pressure in the absence of a nuclear deterrent. As the Chinese official statement issued after its first nuclear test in 1964 stated, China became a nuclear weapons state to “oppose the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threats.”¹⁹ The third use of nuclear weapons could cultivate a sense of vulnerability in nonnuclear countries, similar to what China felt in the 1950s, causing them to seek a nuclear arsenal. It is not unreasonable to suppose that China’s use of nuclear weapons in a future crisis with Taiwan, for example, might motivate some of the other countries with whom Beijing has ongoing disputes—Brunei Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam—to go nuclear.

There are, of course, significant costs associated with building nuclear weapons. In some cases, launching a bomb program may harm a state’s security. As underscored by Israel’s attacks against Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007), countries suspected of pursuing the bomb may be vulnerable to preventive military strikes. Some states might therefore hesitate to proliferate even if the third use of nuclear weapons leaves them feeling threatened. They may instead opt for another strategy: building the technical capacity to proliferate without actually building nuclear bombs. This strategy, known as “nuclear hedging,” allows a state to quickly build a crude bomb in the event of a crisis. It is a potentially attractive path because it allows a country to have its cake (by being able to proliferate quickly if necessary) and eat it too (by skirting some of the costs associated with pursuing nuclear weapons). Some have argued that this is precisely the strategy that Iran is adopting today; Japan is another state believed to be engaging in nuclear hedging.²⁰ If states opt for this approach, the third use of nuclear weapons could lead to the diffu-

19. John Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 1.

20. Ariel Levite, “Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited,” *International Security* 27, No. 3 (Winter 2002-03): 59-88.

sion of advanced nuclear capabilities. Countries may not immediately weaponize those capabilities, but the presence of additional “latent nuclear powers” could undermine international security.²¹

Another use of nuclear weapons could weaken key international institutions, like the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT allows five countries to possess nuclear weapons, and requires everyone else to give up the nuclear option. Many scholars and policymakers credit the treaty with restraining the further spread of nuclear weapons. In the early-1960s, President John F. Kennedy famously predicted that 15 or 20 countries could build nuclear weapons in the coming two decades. Yet after the NPT entered into force in 1970, only four states proliferated: India, North Korea, Pakistan, and South Africa. According to NPT advocates, many more countries would have proliferated if the treaty had not been created. Today, the NPT has near-universal membership: all but four countries are members.²² However, the third use of nuclear weapons could cause states to withdraw from the treaty, which is within their right per Article X of the agreement, so long as they provide 90 days advanced notice. Countries who seek nuclear weapons, alternatively, could remain in the treaty and cheat on their NPT commitment. Either way, the glue that held the nonproliferation regime together for more than 40 years may no longer hold following the third use of nuclear weapons.

The discussion in this section so far assumes that the third use of nuclear weapons would negatively affect the nonproliferation regime. It is also possible, somewhat paradoxical, that nuclear use would result in a stronger regime. The international community often reacts to disasters by instituting sweeping reforms. Most of the major improvements to the nonproliferation regime since 1970 resulted from crises of confidence in existing measures. India’s

21. Matthew Fuhrmann and Benjamin Tkach, “Almost Nuclear: Introducing the Nuclear Latency Dataset,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, No. 4 (September 2015): 443-461.

22. The non-members are Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

nuclear test in 1974 led to the creation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a cartel designed to regulate trade in nuclear technology and materials. Iraq's violations of the NPT prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War caused the international community to give the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the main enforcer of the NPT, more teeth through the 1997 Additional Protocol. And the international community sought to strengthen global export controls by passing United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1540 after the public exposure of the A.Q. Khan network, a Pakistani-based operation that supplied nuclear weapon-related technology to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. As these examples illustrate, sweeping reforms are sometimes possible in a time of crisis. The third use of nuclear weapons would no doubt be horrific. It might therefore create a broad international consensus to strengthen nonproliferation norms, in an attempt to lower the odds that the bomb would be used a fourth time. This does not imply that the third use of nuclear weapons would be a good thing. The negative consequences would outweigh any marginal improvement in the nonproliferation regime resulting from nuclear use.

Erosion of Democracy

Political theorists and international lawyers have long recognized that war can undermine democratic governance—especially civil liberties. In time of war, leaders sometimes face pressures to degrade individual freedoms in the name of protecting state security. As one British lawyer put it, “it’s always the case that the flame of civil liberties burns less brightly when surrounded by the smoke from bombed buses and tube trains.”²³ President Abraham Lincoln, for example, famously suspended the writ of habeas corpus during the American Civil War, denying detainees the right to challenge unlawful imprisonment. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave the military authority

23. Krebs, “In the Shadow of War,” 184.

to remove Japanese-Americans from the west coast of the United States. And, more recently, civil liberties declined in the United States following the American response to the 9/11 attacks. Measures taken by Washington to prevent future terrorist attacks—such as the passage of the Patriot Act—had the consequence of reducing individual freedoms. As these examples underscore, war can put democratic values at risk in the short-term.

War may also have enduring, long-term effects on civil liberties, although this point is more widely contested in the academic literature. Measures that are put in place during times of emergency, according to one line of thinking, persist long after the fighting stops. Ronald Krebs aptly characterizes this view: “temporary states of emergency become permanent, emergency measures are incorporated into ordinary law, authorities employ emergency powers in everyday situations, and populations’ civil liberties baselines adjust to new realities.”²⁴ Others challenge this argument. Measures that are imposed during times of war, they argue, are lifted when peace returns.²⁵ Several historical cases support this view: The United States, for instance, reinstated habeas corpus once the civil war ended (although President Ulysses S. Grant temporarily suspended it again in some places during Reconstruction).

It is also possible that the long-term effects of war on democracy are positive. An executive’s erosion of democracy during wartime could prompt a domestic backlash once fighting stops, leading to new measures that reign-in executive power. Some scholars point to the U.S. experience with the Vietnam War to substantiate this notion.²⁶ When the war ended, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution (1973), making it more difficult for the president to send U.S. forces abroad without congressional consent.

24. *Ibid.*, 187-188.

25. Eric Posner and Adrian Vermeule, *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

26. Krebs, 181-182

How might the third use of nuclear weapons influence democracy? There is general consensus that civil liberties are more likely to erode when states face intense threats.²⁷ A nuclear attack would likely trigger a sense of extreme panic in the target country. It is therefore possible that the target would face pressure to prioritize security above all else. When the conflict ended, the target might continue to impose restrictions on civil liberties, to forestall future nuclear attacks.

The bomb's third use might also erode democracy in states other than the target— particularly in those countries that could be vulnerable to nuclear strikes. Once the tradition of nuclear nonuse is broken, all states might change their views on the likelihood that they could suffer a nuclear attack. Given their obvious incentive to avoid atomic strikes, states may institute new measures to protect themselves from nuclear punishment. One possibility is that countries would give executives more sweeping powers, potentially at the risk of individual liberties, institutional checks and balances, and other hallmarks of democratic governance. Imagine if Russia launched a nuclear attack against Ukraine (leaving aside judgments about whether this is conceivable or not). Following such an attack, Russia's other rivals might come to believe that they are vulnerable to nuclear strikes. In addition, states that are enemies of nuclear powers other than Russia would probably face a heightened sense of insecurity. If Russia used nuclear weapons against Ukraine, for example, Japan and South Korea might fear that North Korea would be emboldened to follow suit against them. The potential victims of future nuclear attacks would naturally seek to enhance their security, and, in doing so, they may weaken their commitments to democracy.

Factors that Might Influence the Political Effects of Nuclear Use

We cannot know for certain, as noted previously, what would hap-

27. Ibid., 186.

pen if there is another nuclear attack. Some of the consequences identified above may emerge following the third use of nuclear weapons, but others may not. Whether costs materialize—and the degree to which they do so—will depend on a wide variety of considerations. This section focuses on some of the relevant factors. I identify the five “W’s”—who, what, when, where, and why of nuclear third use—that could shape the nature and magnitude of the above political costs.

Factor #1: Who Uses Nuclear Weapons?

The characteristics of the nuclear user could play an important role. How powerful that state is, for example, may affect the price that it pays for using nuclear bombs. A superpower, like the United States today, may be relatively insulated from political blowback. Other states might be deterred from launching retaliatory strikes against the United States, for fear of provoking a broader conflict that they would likely lose. By contrast, potential punishers of the nuclear user may be less worried about military escalation if they are dealing with a non-superpower. The relative “rogueness” of the nuclear user would also be important. For a state that is largely cut off from the international community already—for example, North Korea—any additional isolation they might suffer as a result of using nuclear weapons could be trivial. Nuclear use, therefore, may be less costly for those states. Yet, for a country like China that is heavily integrated in the global economy, economic sanctions could have a devastating effect.

Some of the preceding discussion implies that the nuclear user would be a country. But this need not be the case. It is theoretically possible that the third user of nuclear weapons could be a terrorist group. Whether the user is a country or not would likely matter when it comes to the political fallout of a nuclear attack, a point on which I will elaborate later.

Factor #2: What is Targeted?

What the nuclear user destroys in an attack would also influence the political costs. Launching an attack against a city that kills 100,000 or more civilians is one thing. Using tactical bombs on the battlefield against an advancing army is another. Yet another is bombing a remote “hardened” target that results in relatively few casualties. The international community would likely deplore any use of nuclear weapons, but states would probably react the strongest to countervalue targeting. Thus, the political costs—especially the blowback for the nuclear user—would likely be greatest in cases where a state deliberately targets civilians.

Factor #3: When are Nuclear Weapons Used?

When a state launches a nuclear attack is another significant factor. It matters, in particular, whether nuclear use occurs during an ongoing war or in peacetime. Even conventional preventive attacks are controversial, as underscored by the 2003 Iraq War. A bolt from the blue nuclear attack would be a particularly strong violation of a longstanding international norm. Such an incident could draw extreme ire from other states, thus increasing the costs for the attacker. Things might be different if the third use of nuclear weapons occurred in the midst of a protracted conventional war. The political costs for the attacker, then, may be somewhat reduced in those cases, even if the blowback is still severe. Think, for the sake of illustration, about the U.S. attack on Hiroshima vis-à-vis a hypothetical preventive nuclear strike against Tokyo in 1940.

Factor #4: Where is the Bomb Used?

Against whom an attacker uses nuclear weapons could influence the consequences of nuclear use for world politics. Whether the target possesses nuclear weapons is one critical consideration. If the

target is nonnuclear, the potential for nuclear escalation declines. At the same time, some of the non-military costs for the attacker could increase. Using the bomb against a nonnuclear state could be seen as particularly reprehensible,²⁸ and might trigger a stiffer response from the international community. If the target also possesses the bomb, there is a higher probability of nuclear retaliation. Those scenarios, then, are potentially more dangerous for international security. Yet the non-military costs might decline slightly, as others are less likely to perceive the attack as an attempt to bully a defenseless country.

The target's ability to cope with a nuclear attack might also be significant. Several of the political costs discussed previously may be worse when the target is unstable. In particular, countries that are already prone to political violence would probably be more prone to civil war following a nuclear attack. On top of this, unstable countries, which are also likely to be underdeveloped, may be relatively helpless when it comes to addressing the fallout from a nuclear attack. Life in a developed country would almost certainly be chaotic after a nuclear strike, too. But a state with the capacity to at least partially deal with an emergency might be able to lessen refugee problems and other environmental issues, although these problems would still be acute. Therefore, conflict might be more likely to diffuse when the target is weak (for example, Pakistan) than when it is strong (for example, the United States).

Factor #5: Why are Nuclear Weapons Used?

The reason a state used nuclear weapons represents a fifth key consideration. The third use of nuclear weapons could be deliberate or accidental. Indeed, many plausible nuclear attack scenarios during the Cold War and today involve non-authorized nuclear use. It was possible that during the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, a lo-

28. Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, No. 1 (February 1988): 35.

cal Soviet commander in Cuba could have fired a nuclear weapon without explicit authorization from Moscow. If the third use of nuclear weapons occurs due to the actions of a rogue military officer, the nature of the political costs could change dramatically. For example, international attention might be focused on how to better secure existing nuclear arsenals, rather than on how to punish the nuclear user. This does not imply, of course, that a nuclear user would be absolved of any and all responsibility simply because an attack was accidental.

When attacks are deliberate, the intentions of the attacker also matter. First, it makes a difference whether others perceive its aims as offensive or defensive. Most deliberate uses of nuclear weapons that one can imagine serve a coercive purpose: The attacker hopes to change the behavior of the target by inflicting massive amounts of punishment, or impose its will militarily. However, not all coercive uses of nuclear weapons are the same. In some cases, the attacker seeks a return to the status quo ante. Using nuclear weapons to restore stability to a system that was challenged by a revisionist power may be viewed as more acceptable than launching a nuclear attack entirely for offensive purposes. Consider the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The United States tried to force Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, first with diplomacy and then with military force. Yet the international community did not view Washington as the aggressor. Most observers recognized that the United States was responding to Saddam's unprovoked invasion and occupation of a largely defenseless neighbor. In this type of case, nuclear use may be less costly than when the attacker's aims are perceived as offensive, as in the 2003 invasion of Iraq (note that there is some overlap here with factor #3).

Second, the attacker's specific goals are also relevant. Other countries would probably respond differently to the third use of nuclear weapons based on the stakes for the attacker. If the attacker is fighting for its survival, and especially if it was attacked first, others might understand why it resorted to the nuclear option, potentially lessening their willingness to retaliate diplomatically, politically,

or economically. By contrast, others may have a hard time empathizing with a state that used nuclear weapons in pursuit of an important but non-vital objective, like forcing the target to hand over disputed territory.

Conclusion: The Role of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics

Two points about the consequences of nuclear use are worth underscoring. First, many of the political effects discussed in this chapter—for example, the possibility of conflict escalation—are straightforward, but others are less obvious. The effects of nuclear use for democracy and civil war, in particular, have received relatively little attention in the literature. These things might seem trivial when compared to the loss of hundreds of thousands of civilians. At the same time, we risk underestimating the effects of nuclear use by neglecting the political costs of an atomic attack. This chapter represents a modest attempt to discuss some of the main political consequences; there are no doubt others that I have not identified.

Second, there is important variation in the political costs of nuclear use. All uses of atomic bombs are not created equal, even if they produce similar human costs. Both a Pakistani tactical nuclear attack against advancing Indian conventional forces in a future war and a North Korean nuclear attack on Seoul launched in response to a mistaken false warning of an incoming American missile attack, for example, would produce horrific consequences, but they would likely affect world politics in different ways. The “five W’s” of nuclear use discussed in this chapter offer a framework for understanding how the political costs might vary.

More generally, the analysis in this chapter speaks to the tradition of nuclear nonuse.²⁹ Everyone understands that a nuclear attack

29. Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*; and Paul, *The Tradition of Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons*.

would be devastating for the target. However, my analysis reaffirms that the third use of nuclear weapons would also be quite costly for the attacker. A state that launched a nuclear attack would probably suffer enormous political blowback, and would do great damage to the nonproliferation regime (which is damaging to the extent that the attacker cares about limiting the spread of nuclear weapons). These costs help explain why countries have refrained from using nuclear weapons in war since 1945, although moral considerations also play an important role.

In addition, this chapter has implications for the benefits that states derive (and do not gain) from possessing a nuclear arsenal. Some have argued that atomic arsenals are useful tools of coercion and intimidation.³⁰ Nuclear weapons, according to this line of thinking, have benefits that extend well beyond deterrence. States can extract concessions more effectively or impose their will on others simply by raising the possibility of a nuclear attack. Others have challenged this view, arguing that nuclear weapons have little utility beyond deterring military conflict.³¹ The reason is simple: It is difficult to make nuclear threats credible when the potential attacker's aims are compelling in nature (as opposed to deterrent). Recognizing that there is variation in the costs of nuclear use for the challenger helps us understand why nuclear weapons may be useful for some political purposes and not others. Consider a hypothetical scenario where China decides to attack Japan's third largest city, Osaka, after escalating conventional engagements over the Senkaku Islands. The costs for the attacker are greatest in this case because nuclear use occurred for offensive purposes during a crisis in which the attacker's national survival was not at stake. This is partially why this scenario is quite unlikely to occur. China is un-

30. See, for example, Pape, *Bombing to Win*; Kyle Beardsley and Victor Asal, "Winning with the Bomb," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, No. 2 (March 2009): 278-301; and Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve," *International Organization* 67, No. 1 (January 2013): 141-171.

31. Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," *International Organization* 67, No. 1 (2013): 173-195.

likely to carry out a strike that harms its strategic interests to such a degree. Japan and the United States would recognize this at the outset, and they are likely to dismiss Beijing's coercive nuclear threat as incredible. China thus will have a hard time wresting away the Senkakus from Japan by practicing nuclear coercion. In cases like this, then, states are unlikely to derive much political utility from their nuclear arsenals. By contrast, in deterrence, the costs of nuclear use for the challenger are smaller, and the stakes may be higher. A state's threat to launch a nuclear attack if it is invaded, therefore, may be deemed credible. Again, nuclear weapons may deter but they generally do not compel.³²

Given the possible political costs of nuclear use detailed above, states would do well to take further measures to avoid the possibility of third use.

32. *Ibid.*, 175.