

“The Path Dependence of Nuclear Thinking: Grand Strategy, Nuclear Weapons, and the Absence of Evaluation” with Mark Bell

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Why do states rarely evaluate the role that nuclear weapons play in their grand strategy? This is the simple yet intriguing question that Dr. Bell is looking to answer in his latest research. He was inspired to study this question when in the mid-2000s the United Kingdom pondered whether it should renew its nuclear deterrent. In 2007, Prime Minister Tony Blair argued that “the prospect of Britain facing a threat in which our nuclear deterrent is relevant is highly improbable.” Such a statement from the leader of the British government would seem to have led to serious discussion and debate. That is not what happened. Instead, there was never a doubt that the U.K. would renew its deterrent and the idea received overwhelmingly support from Parliament even though officials knew that doing so would be expensive and the monies for defense could be used for other areas of the military.

Dr. Bell argues there are multiple obstacles that prevent states from reevaluating the role of their nuclear arsenal. Some of the reasons include large bureaucracies, the necessary secrecy involved in developing and maintaining a nuclear program, the ambiguity that benefits a state from keeping its nuclear strategy secret, and that the highly technical nature of the field enables political and military elites to exclude certain categories of people from debating the topic. Change does occur, according to Dr. Bell, when a country changes its grand strategy. The conventional wisdom up to now has been that nuclear capability changes a country’s grand strategy. Dr. Bell believes it is the opposite: a country’s grand strategy changes its nuclear policy.

To demonstrate his argument, he uses the case studies of the United States and South Africa. The United States was the first country in the world to develop nuclear weapons yet the Soviet Union would soon develop its own technologies challenging the United States and increasing the stakes of the Cold War. America developed policies to be superior to the Soviets in terms of nuclear weapons, from having a quantitative advantage to then building nuclear weapons that were stronger and more powerful than their counterparts. It was believed that the end of the Cold War would motivate the United States to change its overall grand strategy and with that it’s nuclear policy. Signs showed such moves were plausible given President George H. W. Bush’s signing of the START treaty in 1991, the election of President Bill Clinton and his desire to reduce nuclear weapons, and the joint communications by both President Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin declaring that they would reevaluate their country’s respective nuclear policies. Yet, no changes were ever made. Why is that? Dr. Bell posits a few reasons such as military experts overriding civilian goals, the continued desire for nuclear ambiguity, and most important that American grand strategy remained largely unchanged after the Soviet Union dissolved.

The case of South Africa is quite different. The South African government decided to reevaluate its country’s nuclear strategy due to both external and internal forces. South Africa desired nuclear weapons partly as a response to communist aggression in Angola and the fear it could spread to neighboring countries. One theory put forward to why it removed its nuclear weapons is racially-

motivated: the apartheid regime knew they would soon be pushed out of power and they did not want the leaders of the African National Congress to have nuclear weapons under their control. Dr. Bell argues that a change in South African grand strategy provides a better explanation.

In the late 1980s, the South African government was under heavy sanctions and international condemnation for its racist apartheid policies. Government officials in Pretoria believed time had come to change course and in order to do that two things had to happen: the famous political leader (and later president) Nelson Mandela had to be released from prison and South Africa had to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty. As a result, officials froze the country's nuclear program in the late 1980s, acceded to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1991 and dismantled their nuclear weapon arsenal.

As to whether nuclear weapon-holding states today will change their nuclear policies, Dr. Bell believes it depends on if they alter their overall grand strategies. The United States will most likely not change to a no first use policy unless it changes its grand strategy first. The chances of North Korea ending its nuclear program will not happen until it changes its grand strategy. As for China, Dr. Bell believes that as their grand strategy becomes more ambitious with its increase of international influence, their nuclear thinking should change as well.