

Why Do States Seek to Acquire Nuclear Weapons?

Hamdan Hamedan*

*The Monterey Institute of International Studies

Article Info

Keyword:

*Nuclear weapons,
Proliferation,
Realism*

Abstract

Conventional wisdom maintains that security concerns are the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons. Indeed, history has shown that the predominant decisions to go nuclear (starting from the U.S., the Soviet Union, China, Israel, Pakistan, and to North Korea) appear to be motivated by security concerns. Yet, the fact there have been nuclear-capable states with precarious security concerns that have decided not to seek nuclear weapons serve to challenge the aforementioned conventional wisdom. Moreover, further research and case-by-case study coupled with understanding of the fact that each state in the world has different security condition and challenges show that security concerns are, in reality, not always the primary motivation..

Email:

hamedan_hamdan2@yahoo.com

Kebijaksanaan konvensional menyatakan bahwa masalah keamanan adalah faktor utama yang mendorong sebuah negara untuk mengembangkan senjata nuklir. Sejarah memang telah menunjukkan bahwa pelbagai keputusan untuk mengembangkan senjata nuklir (mulai dari Amerika Serikat, Uni Soviet, Cina, Israel, Pakistan, sampai Korea Utara) tampaknya dipicu oleh masalah keamanan. Namun, fakta bahwa ada beberapa negara berkemampuan nuklir yang menghadapi masalah keamanan genting tetapi tidak memutuskan untuk mengembangkan senjata nuklir seakan menantang validitas kebijaksanaan konvensional tersebut. Selanjutnya, penelitian dan studi kasus ditambah dengan pemahaman bahwa setiap negara di dunia memiliki kondisi dan tantangan keamanan yang berbeda menunjukkan bahwa masalah keamanan, pada kenyataannya, tidak selalu menjadi faktor utama.

Jurnal Pertahanan

Volume 3 Nomor 1
January – April 2017
P-ISSN. 2087-9415
E-ISSN. 2549-9459
hh. 33-42

©2017 JP. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom in international relations avers that security concerns are the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons. That is, “states seek to develop nuclear weapons when they face a significant military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means; if they do not face such threats, they will willingly remain non-nuclear states (Sagan, 1996).” It is indeed difficult to refute that states are motivated to seek (and willing to go through the arduous, complex, and costly steps) the production of nuclear weapons in order to ensure the most important of their *raison d'état*—security. Of equal importance, history has shown that the predominant decisions to go nuclear (starting from the U.S., the Soviet Union, China, Israel, Pakistan, and to North Korea) appear to be motivated by security concerns (Sagan, 1996). Consequently, the security model (i.e., realism theory) has often been presented as the explanation behind a state’s decision to procure nuclear weapons.

This paper, using a case-by-case study, will attempt to test the

cogency of the security model and answer the following research question:

“Are security concerns the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons (and by extension, other weapons of mass destruction)?”

Analysis of Case-by-Case Study

India

India and China had a vitriolic relationship in the early 60s. They went to war in 1962, resulting in an Indian defeat, including the lost of territory to China, and the possibility of future conflict caused by retaliation or border dispute. Two years later, in 1964, China successfully tested its nuclear weapon proclaiming its military superiority in both conventional and unconventional weapons, and thereby, putting India’s security at risk.

If the security concerns are the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons, it should follow that India—a state that has advanced nuclear capabilities and currently under an existential security threat—would embark on a crash weapons program. Nonetheless, history shows that India chose not to

do so; and the weapon program was delayed due to discrepancy of elite decision makers in the state machinery (Samaddar, 2005; Sagan, 1996).

Ten years later, in 1974, when China had no longer posed a serious threat to India's security, India detonated its first nuclear bomb. An important thing to note is that Indian military personnel and the Defense Minister were not involved in the initial decision to prepare the nuclear device or in the final decision to test the bomb.

Normally, if security concerns are the primary motivation, the military would play an important role in the making, testing, and storing of the nuclear weapons. Arguably, this shows that the security issue was of "secondary importance (Sagan, 1996)."

More importantly, domestic support for India's leader at that time, Indira Gandhi, had fallen to an all-time low. Hence, she needed to initiate a spectacular event "to divert public attention from [her] domestic woes" and to improve her domestic support (Epstein, 1977; Potter, 1982;

Sagan, 1996). Nothing works best, she believed, then detonating a nuclear bomb given the contemporary trend that dictates possessing nuclear weapons are considered to be the sign of modernity and prestige, thus they could be used to restore the nation's support, confidence, and pride.

South Africa

When Cuban military forces backed by the Soviet Union (SU)—a nuclear power—intervened in Angola in 1975, the South African government felt its security was at risk. "Six atomic weapons were therefore constructed between 1980 and 1989 (Sagan, 1996)."

Prima facie, South Africa's motivation to have nuclear weapons was to ensure its security considering the bombs could serve as deterrent against the SU. Yet, further scrutiny shows that South Africa's nuclear program was started back in 1971, four years before the Cuban military's intervention—four years before the (supposed) threat emerged (Sagan, 1996).

Despite having no significant security threats in 1971, South Africa decided to start

researching nuclear devices. South Africa's decision to embark on a nuclear program was motivated by prestige and international standing.

That is, South Africa's scientists would like to enhance their standing in international scientific circles by successfully producing PNEs to be utilized in mining situations (Sagan, 1996). It is important to note that the mining industry in South Africa has been one of the most important and profitable industries with powerful lobby to the government (South Africa's Official Gateway, 2008).

Scientists' motivation for prestige, backed by a coalition of the elites within the government of South Africa and mining industry, had not only made the nuclear weapons program of South Africa technologically feasible but also politically and economically. It is also worth noting that when South Africa had successfully produced its first nuclear device, the device was "too large to be deliverable by a military aircraft (Sagan, 1996)."

This occurred because the military was not consulted about the

bomb design, bolstering the notion that the South Africa nuclear weapons program was not motivated by external security threat but for domestic motivations (Sagan, 1996).

Furthermore, South Africa's decision to give up all its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability (including abandonment of the Project Coast—a clandestine biological and chemical weapons program) reiterates the notion that security was not the primary motivation of South Africa's WMD program (The Henry L. Stimson Center, 1999).

In the view that having WMD could be a guarantee for the current and future of South Africa's security, it would be illogical and improvident for South Africa to voluntarily give up its WMD program. If anything, this shows that security concerns and a policy of deterrence against the SU were never the primary motivation of South Africa's WMD program; they merely served as justifications.

France

During the 1956 Suez Crisis, the SU threatened to use nuclear force

against France if France failed to withdraw from Egypt, which was the SU's (uneasy) ally. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the U.S.'s nuclear guarantee was no longer reliable considering SU's second strike capability (Sagan, 1996).

In addition, the U.S. shared an opposite view with France vis-à-vis the Suez Crisis, and demanded France's withdrawal. It would be logical for France, therefore, to initiate the weapons program given that France has the technology, economic, and political means to do so. And it would be logical to say, at this time, that security concerns are the primary motivation for France to seek nuclear weapons.

However, further study shows that the rationale above might be tenuous. France had already decided to initiate the weapons program two years before the Suez Crisis—two years before SU threat to use nuclear force.

Furthermore, if using the argument that SU poses a grave danger to France's security, and the U.S. provides unreliable security guaranty to all countries in Europe

(including France), then why did only France decide to initiate the weapons program? Why other nuclear-capable states in Europe, faced with similar security threats at the time, not also develop nuclear weapons?

This arguably because only France's leaders value the nuclear weapons highly (relative to other European leaders) and regard the nuclear weapons' symbolic significance (Sagan, 1996).

In retrospect, despite winning World War II, France was a liberated victor whose military capabilities and international standing were relatively middling compared to other victors namely the U.S., the SU, and the British (a France rival). For that reason, French leaders sought to restore the national greatness and international standing.

Accordingly, the First French Five-Year plan outlined the necessity of ensuring that in 10 years' time France will still be an important country. In other words, restoring the nation's grandeur and regain international respect and prestige are the primary motivation for France to seek nuclear weapons (Sagan, 1996).

Just as siege cannons, in the medieval era, were status symbols (and science breakthrough) and all kings wanted them in their arsenals, France leaders believe that nuclear weapons are the modern symbol of power, prestige, and scientific expertise.

Thus, for France to regain its international standing in the modern world, France must indubitably have nuclear weapons. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that all nuclear powers were not stopping advancing its nuclear capabilities. This makes the division of the haves (the nuclear powers) and the have-nots (France and others) widened.

French leaders did not want France to be left behind. Equally important, all the nuclear powers were vigorously continuing to upgrade its stockpiles and thereby increasing the aura of prestige of having vast stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

Consequently, having vast stockpiles of nuclear weapons was becoming a trademark of great powers. If France wants to be considered a (legitimate) great power,

it follows that France too must have nuclear arsenals.

Finally, as the new institutionalism literatures argue that modern institutions mimic each other, France (too) mimicked other great powers vis-à-vis their possession of nuclear weapons (Sagan, 1996). It is also worth noting that excluding China, France was the only great western power in the Security Council that, at that juncture, did not have nuclear weapons. As such, French force de frappe needed to have nuclear weapons in order to be in the same (elite) league with other “big boys.”

In summary, France’s decision to develop nuclear weapons was not primarily motivated by security concerns. Claims to be threatened by the SU’s conventional and unconventional forces and doubt of the U.S. security guaranty were only a litany of justification, and never the primary motivation of establishing nuclear program. On the other hand, restoring the nation’s grandeur and prestige in international standing were the primary motivation.

Conclusion and Lessons for Indonesia

All the case studies above demonstrate that security concerns are not always the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons. There are also other motivations that could surpass security motivation in influencing states' decision to seek nuclear weapons.

India's case illustrates that security threat from China would not necessarily turned into triggering mechanism for a policy change vis-à-vis the decision to seek nuclear weapons. Instead, domestic political considerations turned out to be the primary motivation.

South Africa's case underlines that obtaining international standing and advancing mining industry are the primary motivation, while the communist presence in Angola served as false justification.

France's case illuminates that restoring national grandeur and regaining prestige in the international community were France's post-World War II *raison d'état*. Without a closer look at France's domestic documents

and pronouncements, and without knowing the fact that France had already started its nuclear program two years before the Suez Crisis, one could be misled to believe that SU's threat to use nuclear forces against France was the catalyst for France's decision to develop nuclear weapons.

All in all, the cogency of the security model in explaining the primary motivation for states to seek nuclear weapons is not always tenable. The security model, like any other models, has its weakness; it (overly) focuses on the state level. Hence, it fails to look at the micro level—the intents and roles of elite decision makers as well as the domestic mood and political considerations.

As a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Indonesia has agreed to forgo nuclear weapons since 1979. And as a signatory that has ratified the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Additional Protocol in 1999 and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 2012, Indonesia has unequivocally continued to cement its

status as an upstanding member of the international nonproliferation regime.

In addition, Indonesia is routinely the coordinator of disarmament for the Group of Non-Aligned States (NAM), which constitutes over half of the states party to the NPT, thereby making Indonesia not only an important member of the NPT, but also a palpably staunch advocate of a nuclear-free world.

As such, it is inconceivable for Indonesia to try to develop nuclear weapons, since it would mean breaking various international nonproliferation treaties and regimes of which it is a party, and, more importantly, tarnishing its long-standing international reputation. In other words, it is almost guaranteed that, *ceteris paribus*, Indonesia will continue to play a leadership role in realizing the vision of a world without nuclear weapons (Lieggi, 2012).

Moreover, an Indonesian diplomat specialized in nonproliferation and disarmament issues once stated that even a collapse of the international nonproliferation regime would not precipitate an

Indonesian nuclear armaments program. He added that Indonesia would be more likely abide by preexisting international nonproliferation norms and remain non-nuclear (Indonesian diplomat, 2009.).

Still, there are possible scenarios—albeit remote—that may influence Indonesia to develop nuclear weapons. If anything, previous discussions offer several reasons why states may decide to seek nuclear weapons.

Accordingly, it is theoretically possible that one-day Indonesia will feel compelled to go nuclear due to security threats, deterrence doctrines, domestic considerations, desires to demonstrate regional dominance, or to simply join the “big boys.”

Whatever the reason may be, it is crucial for the Indonesian government to understand completely the accompanying risks of embarking on such program, which may include international condemnation, significant loss of international standing including pariah status, international sanctions, heightened security tensions in the region,

precipitation of a regional arms race, or even outright attack by other states.

Reference

Sagan, Scott D. (1996). "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb". *International Security*. Vol.21. No.3.

Lieggi, Stephanie. (2012). "The Non-proliferation Tiger: Indonesia's Impact on Nonproliferation in Asia and Beyond NTP", *NTI: Nuclear Threat Initiative*, March 5, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/nonproliferation-tiger-indonesias-impact-nonproliferation-asia-and-beyond/>, accessed November 10, 2014.

South Africa's Official Gateway. (2008). "Mining and Minerals in South Africa". http://www.southafrica.info/doing_business/economy/key_sectors/mining.htm. 27 March 2008.

The Henry L. Stimson Center. (1999) "South Africa's Apartheid-Era Germ Warfare Program Investigated". January 1999, <http://www.stimson.org/cbw/?sn=cb20020113266>, accessed 27 March 2008.

Indonesian diplomat in discussion with the author, May 2009.

.