Expanding Debates in Nuclear Politics

SPOTLIGHT INTRODUCTION: EXPANDING DEBATES IN NUCLEAR POLITICS

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With the ongoing Ukraine war, Iran in the crosshairs, and India and Pakistan narrowly averting a more prolonged war, nuclear weapons are again at the center of international relations (IR). Nuclear-politics research is at an important moment as well. As we build on long-standing questions, we also must ask new ones. It has been 80 years since the only use of nuclear weapons in conflict, and this Spotlight attempts to expand existing debates and raise new questions about deterrence, nuclear politics, and policy.

Our Spotlight contributions come during a time of revitalization of research interest in long-standing debates in nuclear politics. Scholars in the field have tackled a key set of questions. The first driving question asks: To what extent does mutual assured destruction support deterrence stability? For example, recent research problematizes whether mutual assured destruction was ever indeed assured. During and after the Cold War, second-strike capabilities were vulnerable to a first strike to a much greater extent than believed at the time, as Long and Green (2015) showed. Their study's findings undermine the concept of deterrence stability. If mutual assured destruction was not assured, then recent findings ask what the revolutionary nature of these weapons was even during the Cold War.

As we continue to evaluate the important question of deterrence stability, we also must note that it reflects a legacy of Cold War theorists whose lasting impact on policy and the scholarly community continues to invigorate research. The premise of deterrence stability that even in the context of a "hot crisis," tactical winning would not matter to long-term survival as long as states could retaliate with second-strike capability, initially was developed by scholars including Brodie (1946), Jervis (1991), and Schelling (1966). We observe this legacy in the context of debates on nonuse as well. The use of nuclear weapons in 1945 was followed by a period of 80 years (to date) in which the nuclear arsenal was not deployed. In his Nobel Prize lecture, Schelling (2005) raised the second question that invigorates current research: Why have states chosen not to fight wars using nuclear arms and can this nonuse be sustained?

Counter to rationalist explanations, Tannenwald's (1999) seminal work argued that a key explanation for nonuse is the "Nuclear Taboo," a taboo that now also may be fading (Tannenwald 2018). Empirically, the debate is difficult to study: nonuse would seem to imply a lack of data. However, Press, Sagan, and Valentino (2013) found in their groundbreaking article a way to explore the question empirically. In the "second-wave" research, survey experiments show that the American public is only weakly inhibited from supporting nuclear-weapons deployment (Carpenter, Montgomery, and Nylen 2021; Haworth, Sagan, and Valentino 2019; Herzog, Baron, and Gibbons 2022; Koch and Wells 2021). Research provides empirical evidence, testing both the normative and rationalist explanations under a range of conditions and implications (Rathbun and Stein 2020; Sagan and Valentino 2017, 2025; Sukin 2020). Scholars have found that whereas elites may be more constrained (Pauly 2018), publics around the world appear to be less morally conflicted (Dill, Sagan, Valentino 2022; Smetana and Onderco 2022; Smetana and Vranka 2021). The breakthroughs in survey research call for advances in theoretical understanding of nonuse today, especially with respect to precision nuclear weapons and their potential assurances of limited civilian casualties (Goddard and Larkin 2025).

The third foundational IR question raised by Cold War scholars (Sagan and Waltz 2002) is: Why have so few states acquired nuclear weapons? Recent seminal work unpacks the "why" of proliferation, making it more tractable. How states pursue nuclear weapons may affect their deterrence stability, alliances, and even the likelihood of conflict (Narang 2022). US response to proliferation also differs based on the leaders' beliefs (Whitlark 2017, 2021). Furthermore, understanding proliferation alone may not provide the full picture. Having the know-how—even if not actually acquiring the weapons (i.e., nuclear latency)—can give states meaningful strategic options (Mattiacci, Mehta, and Whitlark 2022; Mehta and Whitlark 2017). The increasing depth and rigor of our understanding of the politics of proliferation, as with nonuse and deterrence stability, highlights our accumulation of knowledge about nuclear politics.

The enduring centrality of the key nuclear politics questions allows for a depth of understanding nuclear politics, but it also has represented an opportunity cost. As we continue to ask many of the same questions that were explored during the Cold War and immediately afterwards, we also may need to examine how these weapons fit differently in the rapidly changing IR landscape. The methodologically rigorous and innovative survey approaches represent a great advancement in our understanding of nonuse (Goddard and Larkin 2025). This theoretical innovation and empirical ingenuity are to be commended. As new areas of nuclear politics become salient, there is increased discussion of humanitarian issues, civil-society engagement, and health and environmental consequences (Gibbons 2018; Maclellan 2017; Williams 2018). However, new questions central to nuclear politics still remain.

The politics that have kept the potentially devastating impact of nuclear weapons at bay for 80 years are shifting. At their core, the long-standing questions of deterrence stability, nonuse, and proliferation and the debates they generated continue to have a significant influence on nuclear-politics research. What made these Cold War questions so enduring is that they offered not only a theoretical puzzle; they also tapped into new, practical, existential questions that nuclear weapons brought in their wake. However, current nuclear-politics research must ask a new set of questions—while not ignoring previous ones—to address the central challenges of the changing world.

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Research Design and Methodology

This Spotlight is designed to expand existing debates. Expanding our inquiry can help us to better understand the broader nuclear-policy landscape. The goal is to introduce new perspectives on politics and policy from political scientists and scholars in the field (i.e., most of the articles), as well as from those in other fields whose research explores nuclear weapons, pushing our thinking beyond the usual parameters of deterrence and even nonproliferation and disarmament. This Spotlight provides an opportunity to review timely changes that affect not only the field but that also potentially impact global security and the changed landscape of nuclear-weapons policy.

The contributors to this Spotlight are grouped under three different types of imperatives, depending on the voices on which their research focuses, as follows:

1. Groups that have debated and protested nuclear policy from the "outside."
2. Groups that are looking to technological change and recent innovations to answer questions about deterrence and nuclear politics.
3. Groups that always were the makers of policy and the conductors of practice but that may find that their strategic incentives also have changed.

Considered together, the articles in this Spotlight reveal an order or categorization that we did not anticipate. However, it underlines our premise in undertaking this endeavor: a need for an expanded research landscape in nuclear politics.

The Outsiders

This set of authors writes about groups and voices that always existed within the nuclear-politics sphere but were "on the outside," as it were—arguing for change or caution from their perch outside of the central debates. Why has deterrence dominated the field of responses to nuclear weapons? Is it time to bring back ideas that go beyond deterrence, up to and including disarmament?

Jessica Epstein's piece, "The Absence of Diverse and Divergent Voices in Policy Making Around Nuclear Weapons: A Review," scans the landscape of which voices these have been over the years. These "outsiders" are actors who may have been largely peripheral to the nuclear-policy debates but nevertheless have had an integral role in how nuclear policies and politics have unfolded.

In "Intersectional Women's Networks of the Early US Nuclear Abolition Movement (1955–1965)," Tanya Maus highlights the contributions of an important group of advocates for going beyond deterrence into the realm of disarmament, pacifism, and peace seeking. That they were able to organize and coalesce across race and nationality—African Americans, Japanese hibakusha (i.e., the people affected by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and others—remains a salient and potent fact that lost its centrality over the years and that should be revived if we are to stop repeating the mistakes of the past.

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Maryann Gallagher and Justin Conrad's article, "Expanding Youth Education on Nuclear Weapons," underlines the importance of not leaving out young voices, students, and others who always have organized around nuclear issues but tend to be on the periphery because of their perceived lack of expertise in the area. The role of education in shaping public understanding of nuclear weapons is pivotal, and the question that the authors are posing is: To what extent are we preparing citizens and leaders to understand the impact of nuclear weapons?

Technology and Innovation

Technology and innovation have always had an obvious and key role in the context of nuclear weapons. The second set of writers highlights again a noncentral imperative but one that has taken on greater relevance more recently. They focus on new innovations and developments that form its inquiry. We define this group as including those who are situated or affected by the technical side of nuclear weapons and also may stand to affect nuclear politics and policy.

Margaret E. Kosal writes in "Emerging Technologies and New Voices in Nuclear Debates" about how emerging technologies have created new opportunities and dangers for nuclear proliferation and deterrence.

In "Domestic Costs of Nuclear Deterrence: Voter Turnout and Nuclear Weapons Testing," Unislawa Williams, Mya Whiles, and Tinaz Pavri analyze the role of voters impacted by nuclear testing in the desert southwest. They conclude that although these voters are not considered central to nuclear debates, the voting data reveal that they nevertheless reacted strongly. If politicians take heed of such reactive voting, it may make a difference in the formulation of nuclear-testing policy and the playing out of nuclear politics. The authors' use of data advances our understanding of the nexus of nuclear technology and voters' power in shaping nuclear politics.

In the future, machine learning and artificial intelligence can only have an increased influence in this area. Whereas technology may decrease costs and thus lead to shifts in policy, lower costs also will represent a political resource that shapes actors' strategies and influence. The changed technological landscape is likely to affect signaling, deterrence, proliferation, and other areas of nuclear politics.

Central States

Which new actors can take on states that have long asserted their centrality? Which new forms of de-escalation can supplement the deterrence dialogues that have long dominated the field?

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Contributors Gregory Hall, Teresa Sasińska-Klas and Weronika Świerczyńska-Głownia, and Thomas E. Rotnem write about the central actors, the nuclear weapons states and partners, and the Cold War rivals. These are the voices that always were the loudest and the spheres in which the experts—along with the politicians—made their greatest impact. In fact, in a sense, these have been the only actors who have been allowed to matter in setting the agenda. Moreover, this has resulted in defining the stakes and making the policies that have been stultified on the world's nuclear scene in the decades after World War II.

In "From Deterrence to Conundrum: Understanding the Emerging Global Nuclear Order and How to Approach It," Gregory Hall writes about the scenario of traditional nuclear politics but reiterates the need for allowing in new actors, relationships, and policies.

Teresa Sasińska-Klas and Weronika Świerczyńska-Głownia's contribution, titled "The Media-Centric Nature of Russia's War Against Ukraine in the Context of the Threat of Nuclear Weapons," explores how media messaging in a case of the more direct or immediate threat can affect the nuclear threat. Media does not only inform about the dangers of nuclear weapons; it also frames these weapons along political dimensions.

Thomas E. Rotnem's article, "Time for a Re-Think? US–Russian Escalation and the Need for a New Deterrence Trifecta," focuses on the two superpower rivals. It makes a claim for a new way of articulating deterrence action and policy—one that allows a "give" to the other side, a chance for de-escalation. This is giving old actors a new breadth of life in the interests of more workable and fruitful deterrence postures.

Conclusions

The need for new perspectives in nuclear politics and deterrence debates is evident from the contributions of these Spotlight authors. There are those who would argue that deterrence in its original manifestation works because we have not used nuclear weapons since World War II; however, a survey of current scholars reveals a need for an expanded research landscape.

These Spotlight authors demonstrate that nuclear politics affects more than the use and spread of nuclear weapons. It is a force in domestic politics, just as domestic politics can be a force in nuclear policy. Nuclear politics is increasingly local and is becoming sensitive to interlocking regional conflicts and emergent crises. Nuclear-weapons policy also has increased in strategic relevance for more countries than ever before, and technology and innovation potentially have lowered the costs of developing nuclear know-how. Although nuclear weapons may have a profound impact on all populations, they still are formally undertaught despite growing interest from youth.

Recent wars are a reminder that the human tolls are unacceptably heavy and that nuclear war should remain in the realm of the unthinkable. If new thinking on nuclear politics and policy can encourage deterrence theory and practice to be responsive to the limitations of the past, then both theory and practice can be enriched.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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THE ABSENCE OF DIVERSE AND DIVERGENT VOICES IN POLICY MAKING AROUND NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A REVIEW

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In a scene halfway through the 2023 film, *Oppenheimer*, a group of people sit in a room with Henry Stimson, President Truman's Secretary of State. He holds a list of potential bombing targets and crosses off Kyoto. The reason is not definitively known. In the film, Stimson says it is because he honeymooned there (Nolan 2023). Stimson's memoirs indicated Kyoto's irreplaceable significance as a Japanese center of history, religion, and art (Sagan 2022). Nagasaki replaced Kyoto, thereby illustrating a primary argument of feminist scholars: "The personal is political" (Hanisch 1970). Everyone in the room with Stimson was white and male. The question this review seeks to answer is whether—in the intervening 80 years—the composition of voices in rooms and consideration for those outside of them have changed substantively.

An examination of the literature reveals three primary aspects of underrepresented voices in the nuclear debate. The first aspect comprises publications by people from minority groups. The second aspect is involvement and engagement by people from underrepresented groups at executive levels of policy making in government, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks.

In 2020, Women in International Security (WIIS) published a policy brief commissioned by the Ploughshares Fund that addressed gender disparity in international security and foreign policy. It considered two factors: the percentages of women in think tanks and those publishing articles in 16 peer-reviewed journals. The study found that in the 11 peer-reviewed international security journals, women authored 23% of articles and another 13% were authored by mixed-gender teams. In the five journals dedicated to arms control, women authored 19% of articles between 2014 and 2019; however, exact percentages may vary by journal (De Jonge Oudraat et al. 2020).

The same findings hold for think-tank representation. WIIS found that women led six of the 32 foreign-policy and international-security think tanks surveyed. Of the 10 think tanks dedicated to arms-control and nuclear-security issues, only one was led by a woman. Think-tank boards of directors and trustees averaged 27% (De Jonge Oudraat et al. 2020).

The Stimson Center (named for the same Henry Stimson in the film) is a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to issues of global peace. Several of its fellows, researchers, and staff members publish on issues of nuclear weapons and are vocal in the debate, including Sahar Khan and Sylvia Mishra. People in present or former government roles who publish on nuclear-weapons issues include Sneha Nair (formerly of the Stimson Center); former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Bonnie Jenkins; and Elayne Whyte Gómez, former Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United Nations.

Whereas these scholars are women, the world of nuclear science skewed male from the beginning. Few women were engaged in high-level scientific positions at facilities that were developing the atomic bomb. When chemists Lilli Hornig and Don Hornig arrived at Los Alamos, Lilli was asked how fast she could type (*The Atlantic* 2019). Positions in international politics and policy were similarly scarce. Of the 850 delegates who signed the United Nations Charter in 1945—when several countries had not enfranchised women with suffrage—only four signees were women (Schaeffer 2020).

Women in nuclear security tend to be concentrated within certain subfields. A 2021 Government Accountability Office survey estimated that less than 25% of nuclear-sector employees were women. A significantly smaller number of women (5%) worked to secure weapons-grade nuclear material (Nair and Roth 2023). Even as more women enter the discourse, their influence is ambiguous. Ray Acheson, director of Reaching Critical Will, argues that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was achieved—in large part—due to the influence of women and other underrepresented groups (Acheson 2023). Some scholars and feminists argue that the presence of women in governmental and other roles of influence has not caused any noticeable shift in disarmament or nonproliferation. The fact of women entering these male-dominated, militarized spaces has proved insufficient to alter their structure (Egeland and Taha 2023).

The third aspect of underrepresented voices is the lived experience of people who historically have been impacted disproportionately by nuclear material and weapons. That lived experience provides insight into how issues such as weapons testing and uranium mining—due to economics or indifference—have been and continue to be those that have the most detrimental impact on marginalized communities.

The African American community's opposition to nuclear weapons began in the immediate aftermath of the bombings in Japan. Although not monolithic, this support arose out of concern for how such weapons might be used against nonwhites. For many, it became tied to colonialism as an outgrowth of institutional racism (Intondi 2014). At its 1946 conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for nuclear disarmament and for nuclear power to be in civilian hands rather than under governmental control (Intondi 2014).

Another group negatively impacted by the production of nuclear materials includes Black African uranium miners. In Hecht's (2009) research on uranium mining, she noted that in South African mines, white foremen frequently stationed Black workers nearer the so-called hot spots—areas that are higher in temperature and levels of radioactive elements. The National Institutes of Health conducted a study in 1994 to reanalyze radon exposure and lung-cancer risks to miners in various countries; however, they were unable to include data from

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