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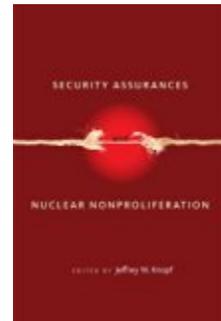
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey W. Knopf, ed. *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7827-5.

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Harrington on Knopf

In April 2010 President Barack Obama's administration released its congressionally mandated *Nuclear Posture Review Report*. In stark contrast to the policies of President George W. Bush's administration that saw little political utility in multilateral nonproliferation agreements, the Obama administration accorded the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) a central role in its nuclear security strategy. The Obama administration sought to augment the NPT's effectiveness in explicitly reiterating that "the United States is now prepared to strengthen its long-standing 'negative security assurance' by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations." The justification for this position is that it will "underscore the security benefits of adhering to and fully complying with the NPT and persuade non-nuclear weapon states party to the Treaty to work with the United States and other interested parties to adopt effective measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime." [1] In the past decade U.S. nuclear policy has been based on two different hypotheses about the role of negative security assurances in determining the nuclear nonproliferation policies of non-nuclear weapon states. The Obama administration presumes that a strategy of making the perceived benefits of complying with the NPT outweigh the costs of foregoing nuclear weapons will motivate cooperation. In contrast, the Bush administration's nuclear strategy emphasized the costs of proliferation rather than the benefits of compliance. Whether or not the relationship between nega-

tive security assurances and nonproliferation posited in the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* is correct and, if so, under what circumstances is an open question.

In light of these changes in U.S. security policy, Jeffrey Knopf's edited volume, *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation*, is timely and will resonate with both policymakers and academics. Knopf brings together an impressive group of scholars to address the question of whether or not security assurances have any utility as a nonproliferation tool (p. 2). The volume is a valuable resource for the study of security assurances, but it is also a useful introduction to the politics of nonproliferation more generally. The case studies are culled from a broad sample of states with quite different relationships to nuclear technology, including Libya, Iran, Japan, South and North Korea, Sweden, and Ukraine.

The study opens with an essay on the concept of security assurances in which Knopf offers thirteen hypothesis about the relationship between security assurances and proliferation. Assurances, according to Knopf, are "promises" (p. 3) and security assurances are "any attempt by a state or group of states to convince another state or group of states that their security will not be threatened" (p. 19). He then further distinguishes between different types of security assurances, the most salient of which is the distinction between positive and negative nonproliferation-related assurances. Positive assurances are promises to come to the aid of an ally in the event of enemy aggression. They usually take the

form of a credible commitment to retaliate with nuclear weapons in response to nuclear aggression against a non-nuclear ally. Negative assurances are promises not to overtly threaten or target another state, and in particular not to overtly threaten non-nuclear weapon states with nuclear weapons. The list of hypotheses that Knopf generates relates factors that could have an impact on the effectiveness of security assurances to the dependant variable of nonproliferation success (the reversal, abandonment, or renunciation of a nuclear weapons program) or failure (starting a program or building an arsenal) (p. 21). The first and most fundamental hypothesis is that “[a]ssurances will be more likely to be effective when a target state’s interest in nuclear weapons is driven to a significant degree by security concerns” (p. 22). He then generates eight additional hypotheses from rational deterrence theory and four from the literature on the causes of proliferation.

Rather than review each of these hypotheses in turn, it is perhaps best to skip straight to a summary of the findings. John Wirtz provides a compelling synthesis in a concluding essay, which in spite of the tentative and contingent nature of the conclusions is one of the highlights of the volume. As Wirtz sums it up, “The contributors to the volume judged that security assurances were effective in contributing to nonproliferation outcomes in the cases of Libya, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, and Ukraine, and to some extent in North Korea during the Cold War” (p. 277). However, security assurances are no “silver bullet”; a formulaic application of tactics, such as stationing troops on an ally’s territory or concluding a legally binding agreement, will not always be sufficient to sustain the credibility of an assurance. Instead, building the credibility of security assurances requires repeated interaction between the parties involved and “emerges more from a process of engagement that demonstrates the importance of the relationship between assurance providers and recipients” (pp. 286-287). Security assurances are most effective when they go beyond generic multilateral commitments. They work best as one element of a comprehensive strategy tailored to the unique needs of the recipient state, which includes concrete positive incentives such as economic benefits. Crucially, before a deal is struck, it is important to overcome any domestic political constraints or other obstacles that may stand in the way and follow through on the commitments made.

Over all, the findings support the conclusion that positive security guarantees are more effective than negative guarantees, although this could be due to a bias in the case selection. The cases sampled include a relatively

high number of states that have benefited from positive nuclear-related security guarantees (three of seven) as compared with the relative proportion in the universe of total cases—especially if you do not dismiss the large number of states offered negative security guarantees as part of multilateral treaty agreements that have chosen to “opt out” of the nuclear chess game played by the great powers. Wirtz puts it nicely when he says that “the impact of negative security assurances—those Mexico enjoys, for example—is ‘pocketed’ by policymakers and theorists alike” (p. 281). It is difficult to establish the causality of a security guarantee, especially where a state appears to lack both capability and desire to produce nuclear weapons in the first place. Yet, taking for granted the lack of desire for a nuclear arsenal is near-sighted because it is the motivation to pursue nuclear weapons on which security assurances are supposed to work.

The conclusions Wirtz draws emphasize the context-dependant and contingent nature of effective security assurances. However, there is another conclusion that could be drawn, one that allows me to bring in a chapter I have yet to mention: Janice Gross Stein’s chapter titled “The Psychology of Assurance.” What I take away from the analysis in this book—other than the valuable information contained in the case studies—is that we do not yet understand security assurances well enough to say anything useful to policymakers. If there is a logic to them, we have yet to crack the code. Stein’s chapter feels slightly out of place in this volume because it is the only chapter that attempts to address the topic at hand from a theoretical perspective that actually competes with rational deterrence theory to provide an alternative account of state behavior. In it she applies her work on psychology and emotions to the question of security assurances, arguing that assurance can be a useful strategy but that any theory of assurances will need to be grounded on a broader psychological foundation (p. 39). Interestingly, Stein’s opposition to rational choice theory is not so much an attack on the idea of rationality itself as it is an argument that the reductive nature of rational analysis impoverishes the explanatory power of theory by robbing it of the concepts that could shed light on what decision makers want and how much they will be willing to risk to get it. As Stein argues, “Emotions are important because it is they that give value” (p. 42). What is at issue for Stein is not whether or not rationality is “bounded” or “constrained” (p. 41), but rather whether or not cognition and emotion can be meaningfully studied under separate auspices.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from Stein’s

chapter is a finding from prospect theory that shows “[w]e are far more averse to loss than we are to gain seeking,” that “[l]eaders are also likely to take greater risks to protect what they already have—the ‘endowment effect’—than to increase their gains” and that “[t]hey are also likely to take greater risk to reverse losses, to recapture what they once held, than they would to make new gains” (p. 40). In other words, the exact same object, goal, or end-state will be valued differently depending on the relationship a person perceives herself as having to that object. Once a leader considers something hers, she will value it more highly than if it were never hers in the first place. A theory that has nothing to say about why that is true is not very useful to decision makers trying to understand the motives and risk calculus of an adversary. If the conclusions that we draw from any procedurally rational analysis are only as good as the values assigned to the preferences, a theory that has no explanation for how an actor could assign the exact same object different values for no objective reason will have little explanatory muscle.

Consistent with Stein’s analysis, this is especially true for strategies of assurance when compared with strategies of deterrence. In the case of deterrent threats, it is relatively easy to gloss over questions of what an enemy values and why because you are threatening them with a loss. In the case of assurance, it is necessary to know what someone else wants or desires in order to feel secure. Better yet, you want to know what they feel entitled to but may not have, or discover what they feel that they have lost and want returned.

Although Stein never formulates the statement in exactly this way, her analysis suggests the hypothesis that the best strategy of assurance is to hold out the promise of concrete security benefits, while at the same time withholding the provision of them pending compliance with a policy or demand. Following on the observation that people are more sensitive to losses than gains, and more willing to take risks to possess something that they already consider theirs, these should be benefits to which others already feel entitled—something that they imagine themselves as having once had, or perceive themselves as having earned. In order to connect this promise to the goal of nonproliferation, the next step is to make the provision of any tangible benefit revocable and contingent on continued good behavior. In this way, constructing a credible assurance is much like invoking a credible deterrent threat. Both strategies leverage a promise of what is to come in the future in order to impact the decision an actor makes today. Threats are promises to rob an adver-

sary of that which they value. Assurances are promises to provide an ally with something that they deserve. In order to be effective, both types of promises must be made credibly contingent upon the behavior of the adversary or ally. Punishment should be withheld (what Knopf refers to as a “deterrence-related assurance”) or benefits provided upon compliance with a demand. Mastering the art of making threats and assurances work together produces the greatest exercise of power.

There are multiple moments throughout the book in which the authors touch on this interpretation of assurances as an element in a coercive strategy designed to enforce cooperative arrangements. Knopf compares and contrasts the study of assurances to the research on economic sanctions and the literature on soft power. Stein formulates a hypothesis that highlights the idea of leveraging the promise of the future in order to secure objectives today: “If leaders are fundamentally satisfied with the status quo but worry that they may be attacked in the future, then they are more likely to be receptive to assurances that credibly promise to preserve the status quo into the future” (p. 48). Yet, I continually detect a lingering presumption that assurances belong to the realm of friendship, while deterrent threats define adversarial relationships. Knopf, for instance, contrasts assurances with coercive strategies such as deterrence and compellence (p. 3) in spite of the fact that elsewhere he cites Thomas Schelling as arguing that effective deterrent strategies always contain both threats and assurances (p. 14).

Only Wirtz gets straight to the heart of this issue when he observes that the operative mechanism of assurances is not always found in the “positive incentives” offered, but rather in leverage created by the potential loss of those benefits, concluding that “An element of coercion, or at least the hint of coercion, might be an unspoken element of all positive assurances” (p. 283). From this perspective, the brilliance of the Obama administration’s decision to explicitly reinforce the link between NPT compliance and negative security guarantees is that it leverages the implicit threat that noncompliance will mean becoming a target of nuclear aggression—capitalizing on what Wirtz refers to as the real “grand bargain” of the NPT: non-nuclear weapon states are presented with the option of opting out of the nuclear arms race as an alternative to proliferation (p. 273).

Whether and how these assurances will remain credible is an open question. Presumably, there is an interrelationship between U.S. compliance with its Article VI obli-

gation to pursue negotiations on nuclear disarmament “in good faith” and the credibility of negative security assurances linked to the NPT. What that relationship is and how it works is an area that is ripe for further study. Fortunately, Knopf’s initiative in producing this volume has laid the foundation for a conversation that is long overdue. There is still a lot of work to be done to flesh out the dynamics of security assurances, but this book

should be the first stop for anyone who is looking for a place to start.

Note

[1]. U.S. Department of Defense, “Executive Summary,” *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), vii-viii.

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