

Todd S. Sechser, Matthew Fuhrmann. *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 344 pp. \$34.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-51451-5.

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Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann have written an essential book on nuclear coercion. In it, they show beyond doubt that nuclear weapons are not reshaping the political map. On average across past crises, countries that possess these weapons are about as successful at coercing their adversaries as countries that do not.

The authors address a strikingly broad range of specific questions to establish their point. Are nuclear armed states more likely to get their way in crises? Are these states more successful when they face adversaries that have fewer nuclear weapons or do not have nuclear weapons at all? Are nuclear states greater risk takers who are more willing to demonstrate their willingness to engage military forces? Are they more successful at wringing territorial concessions? Are they more likely to use military force generally? In every case, the answer is no. Thus, the limited coercive record of nuclear powers is not the result of their selecting themselves into more crises where the conditions for success are less favorable. Territorial disputes are a particular focus because these are thought to be the most likely to escalate and thus perhaps those in which the nuclear factor may be most salient. Sechser and Fuhrmann have looked high and low and any place a coercive effect of nuclear weapons might go. They

show that it just isn't there, at least not in the types of disputes in which states regularly engage.

In analyzing these questions, the authors make use of the Militarized Compellent Threats dataset, which was carefully compiled by Sechser. Difference of means charts illustrate the argument in the chapters and multivariate regression analyses confirm the findings in the appendix. The whole book, including the presentation of statistical material, is accessible to all students of international affairs. Following the statistical analysis of coercion, the authors discuss a large number of cases in which states made explicit nuclear threats. Many of these threats failed to achieve their objectives, and Sechser and Fuhrmann show that even when coercion was successful, the nuclear aspect may not have played a crucial role.

All this evidence raises the question of why such powerful weapons have such limited impact. The authors offer three reasons: nuclear weapons are redundant to conventional capabilities, the costs imposed by the international community on the users of nuclear weapons would be severe, and the stakes of crises are rarely enough to justify the use of these weapons. All of these reasons are surely valid and important.

These reasons are about the nature of the context in most observed cases, however, rather than aspects of the technology or strategic context

that must always be the case. This is important because it relates to the question of whether acquiring nuclear weapons is sometimes necessary for maintaining coercive leverage. Suppose the acquisition of nuclear weapons did change the balance of power and suppose the stakes were extremely high in some context. Would nuclear weapons be an ineffective means of coercion in such a case where two of the stated reasons they are ineffective on average do not hold?

There are also many details of the analyses for scholars to debate. For instance, does the book fully account for the influence of nuclear alliances on coercion and the selection dynamics that are associated with these processes? The authors address these issues, but it may be that states sign alliances when these alliances would be credible co-signalers and build nuclear weapons themselves in lieu of an alliance when aspects of the political context imply that a signal from the potential alliance partner would not be credible. Such dynamics play havoc with regression analyses: the effect of the nuclear alliance is understated in those cases where it exists as is the importance of having either a nuclear alliance partner or nuclear weapons of one's own.

Or one might wonder if nuclear powers have less will to emerge victorious in crises because they have less need to do so. If nuclear weapons provide security from existential threats, perhaps issues that were contested in the past become less important. Even questions like whether the placement of a border advantages one side or the other in territorial conflict may pale in the nuclear age. The separation between the means of achieving objectives and the objectives themselves is not as neat as scholars of international affairs often suppose.

Will nuclear brinkmanship between the great powers of the future always be as ineffective as Sechser and Fuhrmann suggest? The argument against brinkmanship rests largely on the point that states often misunderstand that their adver-

sary is attempting to manipulate the risk of nuclear war. This is true, as the examples discussed illustrate, but the sides understood the risks they each undertook in the Cuban Missile Crisis; future adversaries may too.

An interesting question the authors do not address is the extent to which coercive leverage might be dependent on political culture and the reputations of individual leaders. A state that is perceived as willing to murder civilians en masse and is less concerned with international opprobrium might be more successful in coercing its adversaries through nuclear threats, for instance. Would a nuclear-armed Islamic State be an effective coercer?

Those who wish to understand nuclear coercion must read this book. Scholars and policymakers will find evidence and arguments marshalled here that exist nowhere else. In evaluating one of the most consequential questions of our time, how to react to the continued spread of nuclear technologies, the theory and evidence presented by Sechser and Fuhrmann should be carefully weighed.

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