A Status Explanation for Proliferation

Brian Radzinsky
George Washington University

March 18, 2016
The Puzzle

- Why do states build nuclear weapons?
- Recent work looks at the interaction between the costs of proliferation, the benefits of alternatives, and the intensity and nature of threats (Debs and Monteiro 2014)
- Other work considers psychological or domestic political explanations
The Puzzle

- This work would be more satisfying if we could shake the appeal of alternative explanations.
  - What about bureaucratic politics?
  - What about status?
  - Most cases support a number of explanations
- Did India “go nuclear” in:
  - 1972, when Gandhi authorized the PNE
  - 1974, Smiling Buddha
  - 1998, Pokhran II
- Did France “go nuclear” in 1958, 1960, or before?
- The real puzzle: how do different motives increase the relative risk of making specific nuclear decisions?
Status motives for proliferation?

- Leaders often *talk* about their nuclear programs as if status matters
  - Mao, Zhou Enlai, others: breaking the nuclear monopoly
  - India: reaffirming Indian greatness through technology
  - Iran: Annual Nuclear Day celebrating Iranian achievements, “breaking of monopoly of nuclear technology”

- But is this status?
Concepts

- *Status* is an attribute of individuals which denotes their rank in a social hierarchy
  - Spread through observations of deference-dominance relationships
    - *Reference group-specific* hierarchies
  - Status is a source of power, but people also seem to desire it implicitly
The Argument

- Proliferation is appealing only when highly status dissatisfied (Renshon 2015)
  - After significant losses in relative power
  - After national occupation
  - After decolonization
  - This is an empirical question

- Status dissatisfied elites seek nuclear weapons when they believe status hierarchies are based in demonstration rather than recognition
  - *Demonstration*: status is gained through revealing hidden goods
    - status is a signaling game
  - *Recognition*: status is gained through social acceptance - status is a cooperative game

- Status dissatisfaction + demonstration-based causal beliefs increase proliferation risk
What does this solve?

- Between-country variation
  - France pre-1960
  - Ukraine post-1990
- Possible within-country or cross-leader variation
- Helps us predict status dissatisfaction
France

- Conventional explanations
- Fear of abandonment by the US
- Psychological profile of leaders
- Problems
- Poor correlation between events and actions
- Weak leaders, poor correlation
Timeline

- Early 1956: Military office created in CEA
- Late 1956: Suez Crisis
- 1957: Sputnik
- 1958: Gaillard signs weaponization order
- 1969: First French nuclear test
AF Chief of Staff Paul Gerardot: “France must, therefore, if she wishes to remain a great power and to enter into the ‘club of greats’ in order to make her civilizing action felt, build atomic weapons as soon as possible.”

Secretary-General of the SRP: “It would be inconceivable for France not to do everything to close the gap which threats to eliminate her permanently from the great powers’ club”
Alternative explanations?

- Leaders
- Fourth Republic leaders were generally weak
- CEA officials sought to develop distinctive technology
- Crises and security
- Status and security were seen as complementary goods
- Security presented as a consequence of status