

Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy

Francis J. Gavin, ISBN: 978-0-8157-3791-9: (Brookings Institution Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Dr. Rabia Akhtar¹

In his 1957 classic *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Henry Kissinger wrote about the ramifications of nuclear weapons on Washington's policy and strategy. Identifying how the United States should have navigated the dilemmas of the nuclear age, Kissinger argued that the urgent task for the U.S. Policymakers were to balance their country's power with the enormous sets of challenges it faces. Kissinger made two important points. One, Washington's accurate understanding of the nature and effects of nuclear weapons were critical to maintaining that balance. Two, apropos of Moscow's acquisition of nuclear weapons, the balance of power was greatly affected. He contended that, "not even the occupation of Western Europe could have affected the strategic balance as profoundly as did the Soviet success in ending our atomic monopoly."(pg.10) Kissinger advocated for the adoption of a strategic doctrine that not only gave Washington the greatest freedom of action but also opened up opportunities for it in a risk-prone first nuclear age.

These ruminations were published at a time when the United States' nuclear academy and policymaking community not only refined the theoretical foundations of what Bernard Brodie called the *Absolute Weapon* but also explored viable arms control pathways. Though the debate on the influence of nuclear weapons on policy, and warfare continues to dominate the nuclear academy, the nuclear factor has always been a vital cog in Washington's grand strategy since 1945.

¹ Dr. Rabia Akhtar is Director Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR) and Director School of Integrated Social Sciences (SISS), University of Lahore, Lahore.

Washington's nuclear arsenal not only acts as a direct deterrent against its principal adversaries but also extends deterrence to its major allies. Nuclear weapons, therefore, have also been used to project U.S. power throughout the world.

One needs to understand the enhanced utility and relevance of nuclear weapons in Washington's grand strategy today more than ever. At present, the strategic competitions emanating from China and Russia have been termed as the biggest threats to U.S. national security. With a view to encountering these competitors and strengthening Washington's alliances, the U.S. has added to the list of goals it wants to achieve through modernizing its nuclear deterrent. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review was the clearest policy expression of Washington's discomfiture with its position within its nuclear-tinged rivalries. The release of the Nuclear Posture Review coincided with two contradictory developments: the unilateral evisceration of arms control agreements by Washington and nuclear parleys between Pyongyang and Washington. The U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, coupled with efforts to first coerce and then convince North Korea to denuclearize, informs us of the concerns U.S. has about proliferation of nuclear weapons which are shaping its strategic choices. All this alludes to the significance of ensconcing nuclear weapons-related decisions taken by the United States in its broader, grander strategic mosaic. In his new book *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, one of the most eminent U.S. nuclear historians, Francis Gavin, juxtaposes U.S. nuclear weapons and its grand strategy, with a view to assessing the role nuclear weapons play in the latter. After challenging axioms about nuclear weapons in his magnum opus *Nuclear Statecraft*, Gavin brilliantly parses the drivers of U.S. grand strategy, to fully analyze the political effects of nuclear weapons while establishing a basis of interaction between the two

connected phenomena. However, before making nuclear weapons converse with Washington's grand strategy, Gavin revisits U.S. nuclear history, with a view to addressing some of the questions whose answers are not as straightforward as we believe. Gavin contends that there are two reasons why "less has been learned than might have been hoped for..." (pg, 3) First is the wrong assumption that the core questions relating to nuclear weapons have already been answered. And second is the set of methodological challenges that keep scholars from getting right and good answers.

Gavin's efforts to make us rethink about many of the fundamental underpinnings of our nuclear knowledge are important. He is right in urging us to bring modesty in how we think and talk about nuclear weapons, simply because there are no definitive answers to some of the most important questions surrounding them. Gavin concedes that the task of writing about something that has not happened "is a methodological nightmare, a situation that eludes a definitive answer from even our most powerful and sophisticated social sciences methods." (pg.6) Indeed, the utility of nuclear weapons in ensuring what John Lewis Gaddis dubbed "the Long Peace" is open to question. After carrying out an extensive archival research, Gavin asserts that absent nuclear weapons, some of the most dangerous crises of the Cold War era would not have occurred. Engaging with how Gavin looks at Cold War crises not only helps us reevaluate our understanding of what nuclear crises are but also enables us to add nuances in the overall discourse on inadvertent and accidental escalation. This, coupled with Gavin's cautionary approach in ascribing textbook definitions to the concepts of deterrence and compellence, could enable the strategic practitioners of today to reassess the efficacy of nuclear modernization programs. If Gavin's advocacy for intellectual humility is accepted, policymakers will likely deride the ideas of tailoring deterrence and developing low-yield nuclear

weapons. If anything, a careful analysis of Gavin's book should push policymakers to redirect and broaden intra-governmental nuclear debates. If one were to step back and agree to look at deterrent and compellent threats as Gavin does, it could help reduce a visible doctrinal rigidity. Also, it could open up more policy options for strategists who wish to bolster deterrence stability in Washington's dyadic relations with other nuclear states. At a time when the arms control architecture is in need of resuscitation, intellectual contributions like Gavin's will greatly help policymakers cogitate about matters they had been long eschewing.

Gavin's insistence on bringing politics and strategy back in the overarching nuclear disquisitions scaffold makes sense, especially when he sheds light on how and why Washington stops allies and adversaries alike from acquiring nuclear weapons. In a full chapter, Gavin makes a compelling argument about how the policies of containment and openness do not fully explain why the U.S. has prioritized "slowing, reversing, and mitigating the spread of nuclear weapons." (pg.80) Gavin's identification of a set of five puzzles in U.S. nuclear policy and diplomacy is apt, primarily because they relate to some of the most intricate nuclear conundrums the world faces today. The anomalies that pester Gavin are akin to those that trouble other actors. Gavin rightly questions Washington's constant focus on achieving strategic nuclear primacy since 1945. This is a significant point, especially when the desire to seek nuclear superiority undercuts its positions on various issues, including arms control and non-proliferation. Further, it is fair to look askance at Washington exploring a series of punitive actions against nascent, non-threatening nuclear states, with a view to rolling back their nuclear programs. Answering this question is critical to understanding how members of the nuclear club cling to their deterrents while trying to shape the contours of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Gavin does a great job in enunciating seven reasons that have pushed Washington to disallow the spread of nuclear weapons. By analyzing them, Gavin reinforces his principal critique of the nuclear revolution theory. He writes that, "U.S. policymakers have demonstrated less enthusiasm for the supposedly stabilizing aspects of nuclear weapons for international relations."(pg, 84) As outlined by the author, the U.S. fears that a nuclear-possessor could launch a nuclear strike on its homeland. This worry is a repudiation of the main tenet of the said theory which suggests that nuclear weapons and mutual second-strike capabilities make states more secure, as they significantly eliminate the security dilemma. The fact that the U.S. does not think of nuclear weapons as revolutionary is enough to make pundits wary of the course that the country's nuclear policy could take. This factor would strengthen Washington's resolve to maintain the status quo and continue seeing nuclear weapons as instruments of influence and agency. Indeed, Gavin is cognizant of the fact that the U.S. sees its weapons as influential. The bomb has complemented Washington's diplomatic heft. Also, what has allowed it to retain its position within the nonproliferation regime is the support it gets from allies that are under its extended deterrence umbrella. All this has many repercussions, with at least two being interconnected. One, the U.S. values the bomb as a plank of its grand strategy. Two, the U.S. wants to continue eking out the advantages that the bomb brings to the table by ensuring that both allies and enemies are denied the same. Gavin is right in arguing that, "the United States recognized the potential for nuclear weapons to become the great equalizer, "weapons of the weak," allowing states with far inferior conventional, economic, and other forms of power to prevent the United States from doing what it wanted to do."(pg.86)

What does Gavin's scholarly appraisal of the logics that drive Washington's strategies of inhibition portend? Can it help us predict

how the U.S. will navigate its nuclear equations with nemeses like North Korea and Iran, and allies? If Gavin's findings are taken as any indication, at least three predictions can be made about how the U.S. will conduct its nuclear diplomacy and alter its nuclear posture. One, it is reasonable to state that, come the next Review Conference (RevCon) of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the U.S. will pass the buck on the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS), again, blaming them for not being able to "Create an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND)." Washington's privileged place within the NPT not only allows it to garner much-needed backing from 'protected allies' but also helps it ameliorate its own arsenal.

Two, the U.S. will try to squeeze, reassure, and punish Iran, with a view to ensuring that it does not go nuclear. An inveterate enemy of the U.S. possessing nuclear weapons is the last thing Washington wants. A nuclear-armed Tehran would open the floodgates of proliferation in the Middle East, an eventuality that would hurt the U.S. Similarly, despite the difficulty of denuclearizing North Korea, the U.S. will explore options to rid the Korean Peninsula of nuclear weapons that are in possession of a reclusive, anti-U.S. regime. Allowing Pyongyang to keep the bomb would be risky. Kim's bomb curtails Washington's freedom of action, subverts its regional alliances, and creates proliferation pressures. While scholars have advised U.S. policymakers to enter into arms control arrangements with North Korea, showing deference to that would not align with U.S. grand strategy. Here, it is noteworthy that Gavin has deftly analyzed how the U.S. wants its nuclear weapons to also perform tasks other than deterring adversaries.

Three, Washington's nuclear postures will correspond to the ever-expanding role of nuclear weapons in its grand strategy. The U.S. will want to continue thinking about nuclear weapons as if they are conventional weapons. This would mean that the U.S. will poise itself

to seek continued nuclear superiority at all levels. This quest for increasing the gap will only increase with the introduction of disruptive technologies that could upset the hierarchy of escalation by providing possessors with new conduits to coerce their adversaries.

All this does not augur well for great-power strategic stability. Gavin's treatise challenges the explanatory power of the nuclear revolution theory, and asks scholars to continue to challenge the complacency of nuclear deterrence. Gavin's book is an important contribution, especially at a time when the U.S. is looking to reintroduce full-spectrum stratagems to counter a plethora of threats and challenges.