

Nuclear weapons and territorial disputes: Bringing the Nuclear Revolution back in

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Abstract. How do nuclear weapons affect states' foreign policies toward territorial disputes? Existing approaches struggle to explain the variety of behaviours exhibited by nuclear-armed states, from withdrawing claims and concluding peace treaties to initiating wars and annexation. This paper advances a novel theory—'nuclear-territorial pragmatism'—that explains these diverging outcomes. Drawing on the theory of the Nuclear Revolution, I argue that nuclear-armed states may shift the burden of national security from territorial conquest to nuclear deterrence, facilitating compromise in territorial disputes. This tendency holds, however, only where the state's nuclear deterrent is mature and domestic politics are permissive to territorial compromise; where either condition fails, nuclear-armed states will more aggressively consolidate control over disputed territory. Leveraging primary and archival sources, I test nuclear-territorial pragmatism through case studies of Israeli and South African territorial disputes following each state's acquisition of nuclear weapons, finding strong support for the theory. The findings suggest that, despite recent critiques, the Nuclear Revolution remains a valuable tool for understanding the political effects of nuclear weapons.

From disputes over agricultural plains in ancient Mesopotamian city-states¹ to present-day conflicts in East Africa, Indo-China, and Antarctica, the competition for territory has been an enduring feature of international life. In 1945 this ancient practice took on a new complexion as states began acquiring nuclear weapons: military ordnance of unparalleled destructive capability, the use of which could jeopardise the military, political, and economic survival of affected states. Uncertainty abounded as to how contests over territory, an indivisible good, would or could proceed in the presence of such weapons.

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¹ Andrew George, "The Poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian Poet's View of War," in *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 39-40.

Early thinking on the effects of nuclear weapons on foreign policies toward territorial disputes was dominated by the theory of the Nuclear Revolution (TNR), which predicts that nuclear weapons reduce demand for territorial competition as nuclear-armed states can rely on nuclear deterrence to protect the homeland, reducing the need for strategic buffer zones that add little to overall security.² Recent academic treatments, however, have challenged the pacific logic of the TNR. Referencing contemporary nuclear-territorial crises in Eastern Ukraine, the South China Sea, and Kashmir, the ‘revolution sceptics’ contend that enduring concerns around conventional conflict, the nuclear balance, and relative gains prescribe the opposite effect: nuclear-armed states maintaining, and even expanding the pursuit of territory.³

This sceptical turn in the nuclear security literature offers leverage in explaining the stubborn persistence of territorial disputes in the nuclear age. However, it finds only mixed support in the empirical record: a nuclear-armed France withdrew from Bizerte; a nuclear-armed China withdrew from Damansky Island; and Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of a nuclear-armed Israel, won the Nobel Peace Prize for withdrawing from Sinai, for example. At a minimum, this suggests that there are conditions under which nuclear-armed states will make concessions in territorial disputes. More intriguing is the possibility that, per the TNR and despite recent critiques, nuclear weapons play a role in these decisions.

In this paper I develop a novel theory that bridges the revolution sceptics with core claims of the TNR to explain the conditions under which nuclear-armed states will engage in aggression or conciliation in territorial disputes. Central to my theory, which I call ‘nuclear-territorial pragmatism,’ is the TNR claim that states see nuclear deterrence as a credible strategic alternative to territory, and that such trade-offs are carefully weighed when engaging with the often-punishing costs of controlling disputed territory. *However*, nuclear-armed states will be constrained in so shifting the burden of national security from territorial conquest to nuclear deterrence when: (a) that state’s nuclear deterrent is immature, and/or (b) domestic politics override strategic decision making. I contend that nuclear-territorial pragmatism offers a more complete explanation of the variable effects of nuclear weapons on foreign policies toward territorial disputes, including the

² For key such works, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), esp. 23-45; *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," in *Adelphi Papers* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

³ For key such works, see Mark S. Bell, *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution That Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2020). The use of a common term (revolution sceptics) for these and such works is for analytical convenience, and is not to imply that there are not substantive differences between them.

conditions under which nuclear-armed states will engage in both aggression and conciliation. I further demonstrate the theory's explanatory power through case studies of Israeli and South African foreign policies toward territorial disputes following nuclear weapons acquisition.

In making this argument this paper offers several contributions to the literature. First, it offers a corrective to the recent works of the revolution sceptics which, I contend, overstate the aggression-inducing effects of nuclear weapons on foreign policy. Once we control for levels of nuclear weapons development and domestic politics, states behave more consistently with the TNR than is widely recognised. From a policy perspective, nuclear-territorial pragmatism also provides insight into the levers for inducing compromise in territorial disputes involving nuclear-armed states. Specifically, the confounding effects of ineffective nuclear deterrence and domestic politics suggest policy targets for stakeholders seeking to cultivate territorial compromise. Such guidance is critical given that the strategic, economic, and political significance of territory, and its indivisibility, make territorial disputes one of the few issues in international politics that can credibly escalate to nuclear use.⁴ Similarly, understanding the requirements of compromise in territorial disputes involving nuclear-armed states provides direction for non-proliferation interest groups when prioritising non-proliferation targets. If one nuclear aspirant is likely to resolve territorial disputes through aggression and another through compromise should they cross the nuclear Rubicon, the former would, *ceteris paribus*, be a more urgent non-proliferation priority.

This paper proceeds in four stages. First, I outline the core claims of the TNR and the revolution sceptics as they apply to nuclear weapons and territorial disputes. Second, I develop my theory of nuclear-territorial pragmatism and present a method for testing it. Third, I test nuclear-territorial pragmatism through case studies of nuclear-armed Israeli and South African foreign policies toward territorial disputes, finding strong empirical support for the theory. And finally, I offer concluding remarks, exploring the implications of nuclear-territorial pragmatism for scholarship and policy.

The Nuclear Revolution and its critics

Early thinking on the effects of the possession of nuclear weapons on policies toward territorial disputes was dominated by the TNR. The TNR assumes that the international competition for territory is driven by the search for security: strategic depth, bargaining advantage, etc.⁵ According

⁴ Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 97.

⁵ David B. Carter, "The Strategy of Territorial Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (2010); Krista Eileen Wiegand, *Enduring Territorial Disputes: Strategies of Bargaining, Coercive Diplomacy, and Settlement* (University of Georgia Press, 2011).

to the TNR, the ability of nuclear weapons to deter external aggression should render marginal the security dividends of additional territory, as nuclear-armed states are 'secure and, therefore, concerned only with maintaining its relative position, not with an expansion that would add costs with no concurrent increase in security.'⁶ Accordingly, nuclear weapons should accompany more conciliatory policies toward territorial disputes.

In recent years, TNR-based arguments have come under attack by the revolution sceptics. Retaining the TNR's theoretical focus on how nuclear-armed states pursue security, the revolution sceptics argue that nuclear weapons are unlikely to dampen the security benefits of controlling disputed territory and may even cause the nuclear-armed state to increase efforts to control this territory.⁷ First, while a nuclear deterrent might deter major attacks, it will struggle to deter minor acts of military aggression (skirmishes, proxy wars, etc.) as the threat of nuclear retaliation (a grave and costly act) will lack credibility when the stakes are (relatively) low. One could, for example, point to Argentina's invasion of the Falklands or Pakistan's sponsorship of insurgents across the Line of Control in Kashmir as demonstrating the limited utility of nuclear weapons in deterring minor military adventures. In such contexts, nuclear-armed states may still see strategic value in controlling disputed territory, for example to provide strategic depth against conventional military threats for which strategic nuclear deterrence might be less effective.⁸

Second, while a nuclear deterrent might deter major war today, it may not be able to tomorrow. Nuclear-armed (or perhaps even conventionally armed)⁹ adversaries may, over time, develop counterforce and damage limitation capabilities (precision strike, missile defence, etc.) that are able to pre-empt or defend against a state's nuclear weapons.¹⁰ This will deprive the nuclear-armed state

⁶ Krieger Zanzvyl and Ariel Ilan Roth, "Nuclear Weapons in Neo-Realist Theory," *International Studies Review* 9, no. 3 (2007): 371. For articulations of this argument see, for example, Peter R. Lavoy, "The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: A Review Essay," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (1995); Scott Sagan, Kenneth Waltz, and Richard K. Betts, "A Nuclear Iran: Promoting Stability or Courting Disaster?," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2007): esp. 137; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 297-313; "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990); Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (1990).

⁷ The following analysis draws from Paul C. Avey, "Just Like Yesterday? New Critiques of the Nuclear Revolution," *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 2 (2023).

⁸ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 28-9.

⁹ Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2021); Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, "Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons and the Onset of a Third Nuclear Age," *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 3 (2021); Adam Mount, "Conventional Deterrence of Nuclear Use," *International Security* 50, no. 2 (2025).

¹⁰ Christopher Clary, "Chapter 6 Survivability in the New Era of Counterforce," in *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age*, ed. Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan (Cornell University Press, 2023); Charles L. Glaser, "The End of Mad? Technological Innovation and the Future of Nuclear Retaliatory Capabilities," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2025); Green, *The Revolution That Failed*; Brendan R. Green and Austin Long, "The Mad Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017); Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "The Last Atomic Waltz: China's Nuclear Expansion and the Persisting Relevance of the Theory of the Nuclear Revolution," *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 2 (2024); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New

of the ability to deter aggression through credible threats of nuclear retaliation. As a hedge against this outcome nuclear-armed states may, therefore, continue to see strategic value in controlling disputed territory to future-proof their nuclear strike capability, or to themselves seek to undermine a nuclear-armed opponent's strike capability. Additional territory may, for example, have utility when forward-deploying counterforce systems or providing extra space in which to disperse second-strike assets, building resilience to pre-emption and diversifying attack routes.¹¹

And third, rather than encouraging states to rein in their foreign policies, nuclear weapons may offer states the means and confidence to increase their competitive behaviour, driven by an inherent desire 'to *better* their position in international politics.'¹² This could drive nuclear-armed states to more aggressively press claims to disputed territory.

The works of the revolution sceptics offer leverage in explaining the stubborn persistence of territorial disputes in the nuclear age. Claims regarding nuclear-armed states' concern with conventional conflict, the nuclear balance, and relative gains all ring true when looking at ongoing territorial disputes in eastern Ukraine, the South China Sea, and Kashmir, for example. However, I contend that these works face potentially significant challenges. First, the empirical record offers only mixed support for these claims. There are multiple instances of nuclear-armed states making concessions in territorial disputes: a study by Sechser and Fuhrmann, for example, found that 'China gave substantial ground in ... seventy-seven percent of its [territorial] conflicts' since acquiring nuclear weapons.¹³ Second, these works likely overestimate the security benefits to nuclear-armed states of controlling disputed territory. Rather than serving as a check against low-level military aggression, for example, control over disputed territory is often, as shown in this paper, a magnet for low-level military adventures. Third, these works likely overestimate the cost-savings that nuclear weapons provide when seizing and holding disputed territory given the many challenges around proportionality and credibility that underlie their actual or threatened use. And fourth, where territorial aggression by nuclear-armed states does occur, the arguments of the revolution sceptics, I contend, fail to account for the often-significant domestic political drivers for territorial gains, which risks overattributing strategic logic to what is political decision making. In the following section, I advance a theory of nuclear weapons and territorial disputes that closes these gaps.

Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017).

¹¹ *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 27-8.

¹² Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, 30 (emphasis original). See also Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 1 (2013).

¹³ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 112.

Nuclear weapons and territorial disputes

I define a territorial dispute as an instance of two or more states holding competing claims of sovereignty over a piece of territory, with sovereignty defined as a state's sole, legitimate right to exercise national functions over the territory, such as the extraction of resources, taxation, and maintenance of law and order. Territorial disputes may involve large or small portions of land. The land may be contiguous or remote to the claimants. And sides may press their claims through violence or diplomacy.

I conceive a state's foreign policy toward a territorial dispute as the result of a rational choice in which decision makers weigh the costs and benefits of controlling the disputed territory.¹⁴ For the moment, let us assume that these benefits are best understood in terms of security, with 'security' interpreted in the narrow, realist sense as the ability to resist military aggression from other states (I engage with this assumption later). The security benefits of control over territory can be significant.¹⁵ First, it offers strategic advantages in a military conflict, for example as a base of forward military operations or as defence-in-depth to provide a buffer against an advancing adversary. Second, control over territory can be used as a bargaining chip in negotiating favourable security arrangements with other claimants.¹⁶ And third, territory contains economic resources—populations, natural resources, etc.—that can be directed toward increasing military power. Because territory is indivisible, control over it has the added benefit of denying other claimants these benefits, increasing one's relative advantage.

At the same time, controlling disputed territory can be immensely costly, both in terms of establishing control in the first place and then maintaining it against determined opposition. Controlling disputed territory can damage states' standing and relationships with other claimants, their allies, or other stakeholders with interests in regional peace and border fixity. This can damage trading relationships and weaken opportunities for regional peace-building.¹⁷ Where the disputed territory includes populations resistant to one's control, there are costs associated with integrating these populations, including suppressing insurgencies and building social cohesion. And where there are risks of violent challenges to one's control of disputed territory by other claimants, states must invest in military capabilities to protect their claims. These investments can be expensive, drain readiness for other missions, and drive destabilising regional arms racing. Where conflict

¹⁴ For critiques of rationalist models, see Miles Kahler, "Rationality in International Relations," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998).

¹⁵ Carter, "The Strategy of Territorial Conflict."

¹⁶ Wiegand, *Enduring Territorial Disputes*.

¹⁷ Beth A. Simmons, "Rules over Real Estate: Trade, Territorial Conflict, and International Borders as Institution," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 6 (2005).

occurs,¹⁸ states suffer the immediate costs of war and risk escalation to a general conflict involving attacks on the homeland.

How states perceive such costs and benefits in controlling a disputed territory will rationally shape policy toward the territorial dispute. Where the perceived benefits outweigh the costs, states will be incentivised to strengthen control over the disputed territory. Behaviours in this vein might, for example, include promoting irredentist narratives, settling citizens, influencing laws, consolidating military forces, and direct administration in the disputed territory. *I label this broad spectrum of behaviours as foreign policy 'aggression' in a territorial dispute.* Where the perceived costs of controlling the disputed territory outweigh the benefits, states will be incentivised to cede control over the disputed territory. Behaviours in this vein might, for example, include withdrawing administrative and military presences from the disputed territory, submitting in good faith to territorial negotiations and international arbitration, and renouncing claims to the disputed territory. *I label this broad spectrum of behaviours as foreign policy 'conciliation' in a territorial dispute.* Of course, territorial disputes are complex and typically involve a balance of costs and benefits that result in shades or combinations of such behaviours. Thus, foreign policies toward territorial disputes are best conceived as a spectrum from highly aggressive to highly conciliatory (Figure 1).

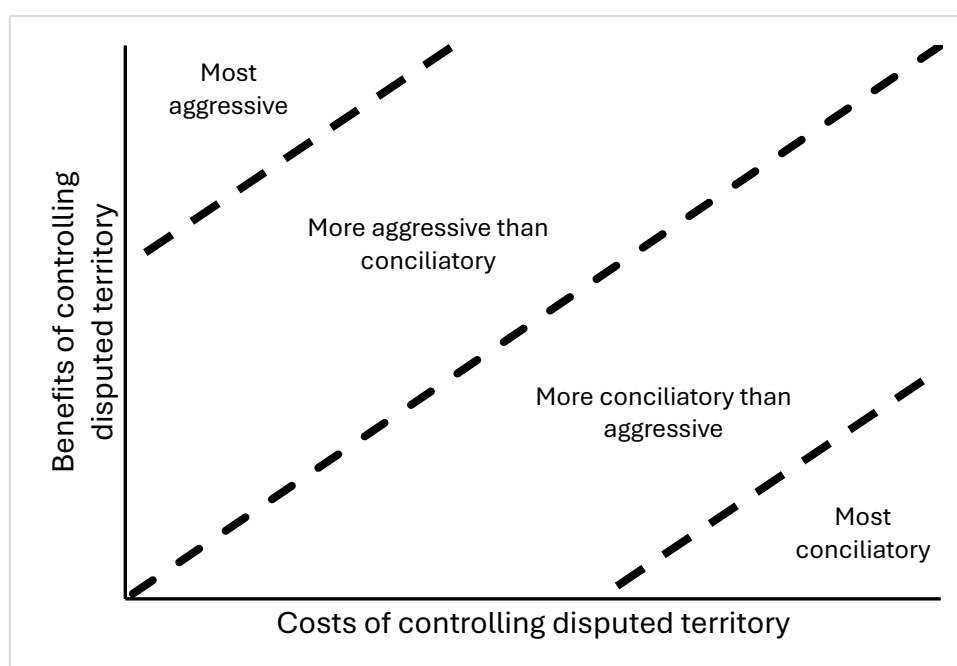


Figure 1. Foreign policies toward territorial disputes as a function of costs and benefits

¹⁸ Several studies have argued that territorial disputes are highly prone to contestation by violence. See, for example, Paul R. Hensel, "Charting a Course to Conflict: Territorial Issues and Interstate Conflict, 1816-1992," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 15, no. 1 (1996); Stephen A. Kocs, "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945-1987," *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 1 (1995); Steven V. Miller, Jaroslav Tir, and John A. Vasquez, "Geography, Territory, and Conflict," (Oxford University Press, 2020); John Vasquez and Marie T. Henehan, "Territorial Disputes and the Probability of War, 1816-1992," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 2 (2001): 307-11.

Following this logic, understanding the effect of nuclear weapons on a state's foreign policy toward a territorial dispute (i.e. toward either aggression or conciliation) can be reduced to questions of how nuclear weapons affect the costs and benefits of controlling the disputed territory.

Nuclear weapons can affect the perceived *benefits* of controlling disputed territory through their deterrence function. In its most basic formulation, nuclear weapons deter military aggression through their ability to inflict massive punishment in retaliation. Retaining for the moment our assumption that the benefits of controlling disputed territory are best understood in terms of military security (the ability to resist military aggression), and per the TNR, the ability of nuclear weapons to deter external aggression should render marginal the security dividends of additional territory.

While nuclear weapons theoretically lower the benefits of control over disputed territory, they may also lower the *costs* of that control through seven mechanisms:¹⁹

1. The *kinetic* mechanism: Nuclear weapons can be used as military alternatives to conventional weapons systems,²⁰ reducing the costs of conventional force attrition when seizing and holding disputed territory.
2. The *shield* mechanism: Nuclear weapons can shield nuclear-armed states from retaliation for military adventures in disputed territory. By so reducing escalation risks, nuclear weapons reduce the net costs of militarily seizing and holding disputed territory.²¹
3. The *coercion* mechanism: Nuclear-armed states can threaten nuclear harm—nuclear use, nuclear transfers, nuclear testing, etc.—unless other states (friendly and adversarial) make concessions.²² Such threats may generate concessions in territorial disputes (rhetorical support for claims, etc.) more cost-effectively than non-nuclear threats.

¹⁹ Mark S. Bell, "Beyond Emboldenment: How Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Can Change Foreign Policy," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (2015); *Nuclear Reactions*. The nuclear latency literature suggests that these cost reductions may accrue before a state has even assembled its first nuclear weapon. See Rupal N Mehta and Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, "The Benefits and Burdens of Nuclear Latency," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017); Tristan A Volpe, *Leveraging Latency: How the Weak Compel the Strong with Nuclear Technology* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁰ Christopher J. Watterson, "Nuclear Weapons and Limited War: A Return to the Nuclear Battlefield?," *Comparative Strategy* 39, no. 1 (2020).

²¹ See the literature on the 'stability-instability paradox,' esp. Henrik Stålhane Hiim and Øystein Tunsjø, "The U.S.-China Stability-Instability Paradox: Limited War in East Asia," *International Security* 50, no. 1 (2025); Robert Powell, "Nuclear Brinkmanship, Limited War, and Military Power," *International Organization* 69, no. 3 (2015); Christopher J. Watterson, "Competing Interpretations of the Stability-Instability Paradox: The Case of the Kargil War," *The Nonproliferation Review* 24, no. 1-2 (2017).

²² See the literature on 'nuclear coercion,' 'nuclear brinkmanship,' and 'nuclear blackmail,' esp. Richard K Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987); Robert Powell, *Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Search for Credibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 10, no. 1 (1985).

4. The *bargaining chip* mechanism: This is the inverse of the coercion mechanism, in which nuclear-armed states cost-effectively secure concessions in territorial disputes by offering concessions on their nuclear weapons program, for example committing to not test nuclear weapons, or slowing nuclear weapons development.
5. The *commodity* mechanism: Nuclear-armed states may sell their nuclear weapons technology for money, arms, or political favours,²³ with these assets offsetting the costs of controlling disputed territory.
6. The *bootstrap* mechanism: Nuclear weapons provide states with security guarantees that may offset the security costs of estranging allies who oppose the former's control of disputed territory.
7. The *beacon* mechanism: Nuclear-armed states can extend nuclear deterrence to protégé states, enlarging their pool of capabilities (i.e. through alliance contributions from the protégé state) that offset the sovereign costs of controlling disputed territory.

Nuclear weapons thus theoretically lower both the benefits and costs of controlling disputed territory. What, then, should we expect the impact of nuclear weapons to be on foreign policy toward territorial disputes? This depends on the extent to which nuclear weapons lower costs and benefits. Three general outcomes are possible:

1. A neutral foreign policy curve: nuclear weapons reduce costs ($-\Delta \text{ Costs}$) and benefits ($-\Delta \text{ Benefits}$) to the same extent ($-\Delta \text{ Costs} = -\Delta \text{ Benefits}$), leading to no significant change in foreign policy toward the territorial dispute (i.e. on the aggression-conciliation spectrum).
2. A cost-heavy foreign policy curve: nuclear weapons lower costs less than they lower benefits ($-\Delta \text{ Costs} < -\Delta \text{ Benefits}$), making controlling disputed territory relatively more costly and pushing the state toward more conciliatory foreign policy.
3. A benefit-heavy foreign policy curve: nuclear weapons lower costs more than they lower benefits ($-\Delta \text{ Costs} > -\Delta \text{ Benefits}$), making controlling disputed territory relatively more beneficial and pushing the state toward more aggressive foreign policy.

To express this mathematically, when plotting the change in the costs and benefits of controlling disputed territory on the x and y axes, respectively, neutral foreign policy curves have a gradient (m) of 1, benefit-heavy curves have a gradient of $0 < m < 1$, and cost-heavy curves have a gradient of $1 < m < \infty$, with all three curves directional and pointing toward the third quadrant ($x_1 > x_2$ and $y_1 > y_2$; Figure 2).

²³ Daniel Salisbury, "Will North Korea Sell Its Nuclear Technology?" Scientific American, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-north-korea-sell-its-nuclear-technology/>.

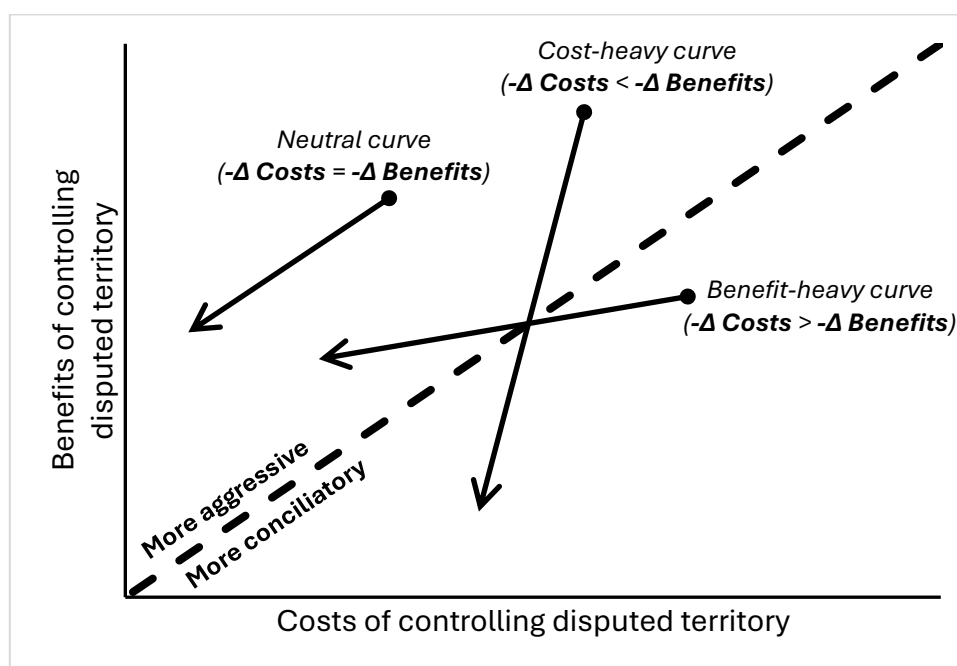


Figure 2. Change in foreign policy behaviour due to nuclear weapons.

Speaking in general terms, which of these three curves best represents the effect of nuclear weapons on foreign policy toward territorial disputes? *Ceteris paribus*, I theorise that *nuclear weapons lower the benefits of controlling disputed territory more than they lower the costs of controlling disputed territory*, thereby pushing states toward more conciliatory foreign policies through a cost-heavy foreign policy curve.

This conjecture is based on the many constraints that nuclear-armed states face in exercising the cost-saving mechanisms identified above.²⁴ First, many mechanisms apply only in certain strategic contexts.²⁵ For example, the *shield* mechanism is most useful only when the nuclear-armed state is at a conventional disadvantage.²⁶ Second, many of these mechanisms are costly to deploy, potentially creating more costs than they save. The *kinetic* mechanism, for example, which involves offensive nuclear use, would almost certainly attract enormous costs: economic and military sanctions, distancing or abandonment by allies, increased appetite for nuclear proliferation among adversaries,²⁷ and massive military retaliation (conventional or nuclear) by the targeted state and its allies. Third, several of these mechanisms (in particular the *shield* and *coercion* mechanisms) are

²⁴ The following arguments draw in particular from Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, esp. 45-56.

²⁵ Mark S. Bell, "Nuclear Opportunism: A Theory of How States Use Nuclear Weapons in International Politics," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019).

²⁶ S. Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Nicholas L. Miller, "Nuclear Dominoes: A Self-Defeating Prophecy?," *Security Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014).

guaranteed by a state's willingness to use nuclear weapons, threats of which will struggle for credibility when the target state is itself nuclear-armed or when the stakes of the territorial dispute are relatively low.²⁸ And fourth, decision makers may carry psychological or organisational biases against the use of nuclear weapons when competing for disputed territory. Biases may include perceptions that such use of nuclear weapons is too difficult to control or the outcomes too uncertain,²⁹ or that such use is normatively unjustifiable.³⁰

One might reasonably counter that challenges of scope, cost, credibility, and taboo when using nuclear weapons to control disputed territory similarly apply when deterring aggression against the homeland, thus shrinking **-Δ Benefits** as with **-Δ Costs**, pushing a cost-heavy curve toward a neutral curve. In general, I assume that such constraints apply more when controlling disputed territory than when defending the homeland (while conceding that 'competing for disputed territory' and 'defending the homeland' are not always readily distinguishable). Specifically, nuclear-armed states are likely to issue more credible threats, less likely to exhibit self-restraint, and less likely to attract international recriminations when leveraging nuclear weapons to protect the status quo and widely recognised borders.

These theoretical deductions reveal an empirical puzzle: why do so many nuclear-armed states aggressively pursue territorial expansion, often at significant cost? For example, nuclear-armed Pakistan continues courting disaster on the subcontinent as it attempts to wrest control of Jammu and Kashmir from India. Nuclear-armed China is driving an anti-Chinese arms build-up in the Indo-Pacific as it seeks to extend sovereign control over maritime features in the South and East China Seas. And nuclear-armed Russia is bearing enormous strategic, economic, and diplomatic costs in its ongoing efforts to annex Eastern Ukraine.

I theorise that two factors will shrink **-Δ Benefits** sufficiently to shift nuclear-armed states to a benefit-heavy curve and thus rationalise strengthening control over the disputed territory. First, a state's nuclear weapons capabilities may be immature. The extent to which a state's nuclear weapons deter military aggression (thereby contributing to national security and reducing the security benefits of additional territory per the TNR) will vary according to multiple variables, for example: the credibility with which the nuclear-armed state can threaten nuclear use;³¹ the nuclear-

²⁸ For a classical treatment of credibility and nuclear use, see Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1960).

²⁹ Michael Cohen, *When Proliferation Causes Peace* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

³⁰ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³¹ Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019); D. Marc Kilgour and Frank C. Zagare, "Credibility, Uncertainty, and

armed state's ability to range and inflict unacceptable damage upon adversaries;³² the survivability of the nuclear arsenal;³³ and external recognition of these capabilities.³⁴ States that score poorly along such measures will struggle to deter military threats through nuclear deterrence, and will therefore continue to lean on the strategic benefits of territorial expansion for national security.

And second, states may face domestic political constraints on territorial compromise. To this point we have conceived the benefits of controlling disputed territory purely in terms of security from military aggression. However, there are other reasons that states might seek control in disputed territory. In particular, states, or more specifically decision makers within states, frequently contest territorial disputes to manage threats to the political power of ruling elites.³⁵ These threats can be legal/institutional, e.g. term limits; electoral, e.g. declining popularity; or violent, e.g. coups.³⁶ For example, controlling disputed territory can improve popularity with nationalist or irredentist interest groups,³⁷ cultivate a 'strongman image' that weakens political rivals,³⁸ or offer additional resources—land, natural resources, etc.—to buy off threats to the regime or fund repressive state apparatuses.³⁹ Thus, while nuclear weapons may lower the *military* security benefits of controlling disputed territory, they are unlikely to lower the *regime* security benefits—principally staying in power—of controlling disputed territory.⁴⁰

Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (1991); Reid B. C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International Security* 47, no. 3 (2023); Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 187-203.

³² McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (1969); Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons after the Cold War," *ibid.* 70, no. 4 (1991); Jeffrey Lewis, "Minimum Deterrence," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 64, no. 3 (2008); Kyungwon Suh, "Achieving Minimum Deterrence: A New Dyadic Dataset on Strategic Nuclear Weapons Delivery Capabilities," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68, no. 5 (2023).

³³ Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2015).

³⁴ David C. Logan, "The Nuclear Balance Is What States Make of It," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (2022); Mark S. Bell; Nicholas L. Miller, "The Limits of Nuclear Learning in the New Nuclear Age," in *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age*, ed. Scott D. Sagan Vipin Narang (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023); Joseph S. Nye, "Nuclear Ethics Revisited," *Ethics & International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2023). For an overview of different perspectives, see Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 33-41.

³⁵ J. Patrick Rhamey, Jr. et al., "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Accounting for the Domestic Alongside the International," *International Studies Review* 27, no. 4 (2025).

³⁶ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (MIT press, 2005); Milan W Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁷ James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994); Karin Von Hippel, "Sunk in the Sahara: The Applicability of the Sunk Cost Effect to Irredentist Disputes," *The Journal of North African Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996).

³⁸ Aleksandar Matovski, "How Putin's Regime Survivalism Drives Russian Aggression," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023); Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012).

³⁹ Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?," *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001).

⁴⁰ The inclusion of domestic politics in theorising does not betray my earlier assumption of rationality. Actors are simply assumed to respond (rationally) to a different array of constraints than those imposed (at least directly) by the international system. See Stephen Quackenbush, "The Rationality of Rational Choice Theory," *International Interactions* 30, no. 2 (2004).

Nuclear-territorial pragmatism

The above allows us to draw some theoretical claims regarding the effects of nuclear weapons on states' foreign policies toward territorial disputes. Rational states will weigh the costs and benefits of controlling disputed territory when deciding policy. Nuclear weapons sufficiently lower the benefits of territorial expansion to justify greater conciliation toward the territorial dispute. However, the benefits of territorial expansion will remain strong where: (a) the nuclear-armed state's nuclear deterrent is immature; and/or (b) the territorial dispute has high domestic political salience. In such cases, nuclear-armed states will more aggressively seek control in the disputed territory (Figure 3). I label this theory '*nuclear-territorial pragmatism*.' I choose the word 'pragmatism' to reflect the central role that balancing costs and benefits plays in decision making.

		Domestic political salience	
		Low	High
Nuclear deterrent	Mature	More conciliation	More aggression
	Immature		

Figure 3. Theoretical expectations of nuclear-territorial pragmatism

It's worth emphasising that nuclear-territorial pragmatism does not predict that nuclear-armed states will be aggressive or conciliatory in territorial disputes. It predicts that they will be more aggressive or more conciliatory than they would otherwise be without nuclear weapons. Additionally, nuclear-territorial pragmatism does not predict that nuclear-armed states' foreign policies toward territorial disputes will be only more aggressive or only more conciliatory than they would be without nuclear weapons. The theory posits that nuclear weapons create incentives for both foreign policy aggression and conciliation, i.e. by reducing both the costs and benefits of controlling territory. Critical to the theory, however, is that the effects of nuclear weapons on costs and benefits are uneven, and this utility differential should bias foreign policy decisions such that there is an aggregate trend toward ceding or consolidating control. It's also worth clarifying that nuclear-territorial pragmatism is a theory of foreign policy toward territorial disputes; not territorial disputes. In other words, I theorise how states with nuclear weapons will behave in territorial disputes, but I make no direct claims as to how or when territorial disputes are initiated or resolved, nor the outcomes of territorial disputes.

Nuclear-territorial pragmatism is built on the core TNR premise that nuclear deterrence reduces security-based incentives for territory. But it also incorporates insights from the revolution sceptics. First, and per the revolution sceptics, nuclear-territorial pragmatism maintains that nuclear

weapons can reduce the costs of foreign policy aggression, including in territorial disputes.⁴¹ Where it differs is that it assumes that any such cost-savings will be limited given the many constraints that nuclear-armed states face when attempting to lean on their nuclear weapons capabilities to control disputed territory. Additionally, and per the revolution sceptics, nuclear-territorial pragmatism holds that the security benefits of additional territory will remain strong when nuclear-armed states cannot issue credible threats of nuclear retaliation.⁴² Where it differs is in assuming that, once such threats are credible, nuclear-armed states will not vigorously pursue additional territory as a hedge against low-level military aggression or unfavourable changes in the nuclear balance. Absent strong and immediate security-based rationales for territorial expansion, and hoping to manage the costs of controlling disputed territory, I theorise that rational nuclear-armed states will be content to cede control over disputed territory. States do not have bottomless war chests with which to endlessly pursue unassailable security; at some point 'good enough' is good enough.⁴³

Nuclear-territorial pragmatism also extends both the TNR and revolution sceptic schools by emphasising the confounding role that domestic politics plays in decision making. When it comes to territorial disputes in particular, which readily 'become emotional tests of patriotism as opposed to questions of dispassionate logic or rationality,'⁴⁴ domestic politics can significantly constrain strategic decision making.

With these inclusions, nuclear-territorial pragmatism potentially offers greater explanatory power than existing approaches, with a particular source of leverage being the ability to explain *both* aggression and conciliation by nuclear-armed states in territorial disputes.

Testing the theory

In the following section I test the theoretical expectations of nuclear-territorial pragmatism through case studies of nuclear-armed Israeli and South African foreign policies toward territorial disputes, with analysis focused on foreign policies shortly after nuclear weapons acquisition in each state. These were deliberate case choices. Nuclear-territorial pragmatism's biggest departure from the contemporary literature—i.e. that dominated by the revolution sceptics—is that it theorises

⁴¹ See in particular Bell, "Beyond Emboldenment."

⁴² See in particular Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 26-7.

⁴³ How much security is 'enough' for states in anarchy is a recurring point of debate in the neorealist literature. See Davide Fiammenghi, "The Security Curve and the Structure of International Politics: A Neorealist Synthesis," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011); Glenn H. Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World-Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay," *ibid.* 27, no. 1 (2002).

⁴⁴ Michael P. Colaresi, Karen Rasler, and William R. Thompson, "Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space and Conflict Escalation," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 242.

that nuclear-armed states can engage in territorial conciliation (in addition to aggression). I judged that Israel and South Africa would be hard cases for such a tendency as both states (in the period of analysis) largely operated as ‘pariah’ states outside the strictures of international norms: Israel due to shifting global opinion on the Palestine issue and South Africa due to its universally maligned policy of racial segregation under Apartheid. Fewer normative constraints on foreign policy offers added confidence that any observed tendency toward territorial conciliation is based on calculated assessments of costs and benefits (i.e. per nuclear-territorial pragmatism) and not enlightened commitments to the many norms pushing states toward peaceful settlements of territorial disputes: non-aggression, border fixity, etc.

Israel has the added advantage of not being one but rather three cases, as it was (in the period of analysis) engaged in three separate territorial disputes in the West Bank, Sinai and Gaza, and the Golan Heights. Moreover, a nuclear-armed Israel demonstrated both highly aggressive and conciliatory foreign policies to these discrete disputes, ranging from annexation to withdrawing claims. This provides an opportunity to test the causes of the full range of nuclear-territorial pragmatism’s theoretical outcomes while holding potentially confounding variables (regime type, strategic culture, etc.) constant.⁴⁵

Finally, observing the foreign policies of nuclear-armed states immediately after nuclear weapons acquisition provides analytical opportunities to observe discontinuities in foreign policy at the point of nuclear weapons acquisition. Observing foreign policy change consistent with the expectations of nuclear-territorial pragmatism (i.e. toward more conciliation or more aggression) at the point of nuclear weapons acquisition would provide correlational evidence of the theory’s relevance while controlling for confounding variables that vary over the longer term (conventional military technology, international law and institutions, etc.).

Case studies

Israel’s search for ‘defensible borders’

Following the first Arab-Israeli War, the 1949 armistice agreements established Armistice Demarcation Lines (ADLs), which set the interim boundaries of Israeli and Arab territorial control pending a final peace settlement. In May 1967, Egypt mobilised troops in Sinai and closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping.⁴⁶ Sensing that conflict was imminent, on June 5 Israel launched

⁴⁵ See ‘most-similar’ case types in Jason Seawright and John Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008): 304-6.

⁴⁶ Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 382-97.

a pre-emptive ground and aerial assault against Egypt. Jordan and Syria entered the fighting the same day, leading to open war between Israel and the Arab coalition. The conflict—which became known as the ‘Six Day War’—concluded on June 10 in a decisive Israeli victory, with Israel taking control of the Golan Heights (from Syria), the West Bank (from Jordan), and Sinai and Gaza (from Egypt).

It was during the Six Day War that Israel assembled its first functional nuclear devices.⁴⁷ Israel saw its nuclear capability as a weapon of last resort, reserved for extreme circumstances threatening the survival of the state. Though there had been some internal discussion on utilising its inchoate nuclear weapons capability during the Six Day War, Israel’s conventional success meant that no action was taken.⁴⁸ Israel would subsequently maintain a posture of ‘nuclear opacity,’ neither publicly confirming nor denying the possession of nuclear weapons.⁴⁹

The search for security

After the Six Day War a debate emerged in Israel as to how best to convert these territorial gains into security. On the one hand, territory was seen as a bargaining chip with which to pursue comprehensive peace agreements with the Arab states. And on the other, territory was seen as a source of ‘defensible borders’ that could provide strategic depth against future Arab attacks.⁵⁰ The Israeli cabinet initially tended toward the former, unanimously adopting nine days after the War a motion in favour of ‘the signing of a peace agreement with Egypt and with Syria based on the international border.’⁵¹ The Israeli position on the West Bank was more hedged. The ‘Allon Plan,’ which became the blueprint of Israeli policy in the West Bank, proposed Israeli retention of approximately 40% of strategically significant portions of the West Bank, with the remaining territory either going to an independent Palestinian state or Jordan.⁵²

The decision to return large swaths of land to the Arab states in exchange for peace agreements was not taken lightly. Senior Israeli officials recognised that the Arab states could always renege on land-for-peace deals, with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin asking rhetorically in a 1976

⁴⁷ Avner Cohen, "Nuclear Dimensions of the 1967 Middle East War: An Israeli Perspective," *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5-6 (2018).

⁴⁸ "Cairo, Dimona, and the June 1967 War," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (1996): esp. 209; Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 142-43; Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and Its Cold War Deals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 85.

⁴⁹ Avner Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity: The United States, Israel, and the Atom, 1960–63," *Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (1994).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Yigal Allon, "Israel: The Case for Defensible Borders," *Foreign Affairs* 55, no. 1 (1976).

⁵¹ Reuven Pedatzur, "Coming Back Full Circle: The Palestinian Option in 1967," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 2 (1995): 272.

⁵² Shlomo Aronson, *Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East: An Israeli Perspective* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 86-7.

press conference: 'Is Israel able to concede significant parts of Sinai which gives it strategic depth in return for a promise of non-belligerency, while it has no guarantee that Egypt will in fact, honor it when aggressive acts occur on other Arab fronts?'⁵³ Such concerns were anchored in a still pervasive view that the Arab states would never recognise Israeli statehood as articulated by Henry Kissinger in 1976: 'there is still an article of faith among the majority of Israelis ... that the Arabs are unalterably hostile and that territorial concessions will not change this but will only result in Israel's having to fight the next war in a less advantageous posture.'⁵⁴

While difficult to validate given Israel's nuclear opacity, indicators suggest nuclear weapons contributed at least partly to Jerusalem's risk acceptance. First, the limited Israeli debate on nuclear strategy visible in public sources reveals that at least two senior Israeli powerbrokers in the ruling Labor Alignment—Shimon Peres⁵⁵ and Moshe Dayan⁵⁶—were sympathetic to the 'nuclear weapons as a substitute for strategic depth' argument. This doesn't show that such thinking was decisive in Israeli territorial policy, but it at least suggests that such thinking would have featured in internal debates. And second, the Arabs were increasingly identifying Israel's nuclear weapons capability as a check on military activities beyond the ADL. In private, Arab states were cautioning against major military operations on the basis of nuclear escalation risks;⁵⁷ voices in the Arab media argued that Israeli nuclear weapons ruled out attacks on the 'heavily populated heartland of Israel';⁵⁸ and in periods of military conflict, the Arab states refrained from pushing military advantages beyond the ADL.⁵⁹ Such restraint would have lent credibility to Israeli assessments (where they existed) that territorial concessions in the occupied territories carried lower risk.

The conflict drags on

Israel-Arab peace settlements proved elusive, due in part to the Arab reluctance to accept Israeli-imposed conditions (i.e. comprehensive peace) on the return of the occupied territories. Israel thus

⁵³ Abraham R. Wagner, "Israeli Perceptions of American Security Policy: Current Trends and Future Alternatives," (Washington D.C.: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1976), 70.

⁵⁴ Memorandum for: The President, Rabin Visit January 1976, Box 40, Records of Joseph J. Sisco, 1951–1976, General Records of the Department of State, 1763–2002, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, MD, 5.

⁵⁵ Cohen, "Stumbling into Opacity," 199–200; Shlomo Aronson, *The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: Opacity, Theory, and Reality, 1960–1991, an Israeli Perspective* (New York: State University of New York, 1992), 8.

⁵⁶ Uri Bar-Joseph, "The Hidden Debate: The Formation of Nuclear Doctrines in the Middle East," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2008): 217.

⁵⁷ Shlomo Aronson, "The Nuclear Dimension of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Case of the Yom Kippur War," *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1–2 (1984): 116; Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 134.

⁵⁸ Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1982), 61–2; Steven J. Rosen, "A Stable System of Mutual Nuclear Deterrence in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *The American Political Science Review* 71, no. 4 (1977): 1372–3.

⁵⁹ Aronson, "The Nuclear Dimension of the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 118–20, 27–9; Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 231–32.

maintained control over Sinai and Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights through the 1970s, though accrued enormous costs in doing so. Israeli occupation incited subnational resistance from Palestinian groups, provoked stronger Soviet commitments to the Arab states,⁶⁰ shifted the demographic profile of Israeli-controlled territory leading to domestic divisions, and incited Arab attacks to reclaim the territories.⁶¹

Further, while Israel's nuclear deterrent was ostensibly proving effective in deterring attacks across the ADL, it contributed little to deterrence in the occupied territories. In October 1973, a combined Arab force launched a multifront attack on the occupied Sinai and Golan Heights, including a combined Egyptian-Syrian assault of approximately 145,000 soldiers.⁶² The Yom Kippur War, named after the Jewish holy day on which it was launched, occurred despite the fact that, by 1973, Israel had entered full-scale production of nuclear warheads and had credible ground- and air-based delivery options capable of ranging all Arab capitals.⁶³ For the Arab states, Israel's nuclear deterrent would only become a factor were there attempts to cross the ADL, leaving the occupied territories fair game for conventional contestation.⁶⁴

Israel's nuclear weapons were not entirely without use, however. At the height of the Yom Kippur War, Jerusalem reportedly signalled that they would break nuclear opacity unless the United States backstopped Israel's deteriorating conventional position.⁶⁵ Though initially reluctant, Washington—which held an interest in preventing a public Israeli nuclear breakout⁶⁶—initiated an airlift shortly after the signal was made, and over 11 days (up until a ceasefire was declared) airlifted to Israel 'approximately 11,000 tons of equipment, forty F-40 Phantoms, thirty-six A-4 Skyhawks and twelve C-130 transports.'⁶⁷ This rapid conventional support undoubtedly contributed to Israeli efforts to repel the Arab forces, resulting in only minor changes to the territorial status quo. To the extent that this airlift was driven by US concerns around Israeli nuclear signalling,⁶⁸ therefore,

⁶⁰ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967–1973: The Ussr's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 69.

⁶¹ Avner Yaniv, *Deterrence without the Bomb: The Politics of Israeli Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), 249.; David Rodman, "Israel's National Security Doctrine: An Introductory Overview," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2001): 73.; Giora Goodman, "Explaining the Occupation: Israeli Hasbara and the Occupied Territories in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War," *Journal of Israeli History* (2017).

⁶² Elinor Burkett, *Golda* (Harper Collins, 2008), 318.

⁶³ Warner D. Farr, *The Third Temple's Holy of Holies: Israel's Nuclear Weapons* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1999), 11; Seymour M. Hersh, *Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), 178-219; Richard Sale, "Yom Kippur: Israel's 1973 Nuclear Alert," Sept. 16 2002.

⁶⁴ Ginor and Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War*, 67-72.

⁶⁵ Camille Mansour, *Beyond Alliance: Israel in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*, 87.

⁶⁷ William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 185.

⁶⁸ On US concerns around Israel going public with its nuclear weapons capabilities, see Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 179-206; Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests*, 87. On the extent to which Israeli nuclear signalling affected US

Israel had reduced the costs of maintaining control of the disputed territories, specifically by using nuclear threats to limit attrition of materiel (the coercion mechanism).

While this may have helped stabilise the Israeli conventional position in a crisis, it neither dulled the conflict's long-term costs nor stemmed the mounting burden of occupation. A 1975 State Department briefing wrote plainly that 'Israel since October 1973 has moved from a position of substantial independence to a condition which can almost be described as economic unviability and very substantial dependence on the U.S.'⁶⁹

Settlement politics hijack the debate

The Yom Kippur War coincided with a noticeable 'hardening' of Israeli popular opinion toward the Arab states and a renewed emphasis on 'defensible borders'.⁷⁰ In an October 1975 poll, three times as many Israeli respondents prioritised 'strategic territories' over 'American support'.⁷¹ The popular desire for 'defensible borders' provided political space for new entities championing territorial maximalism. The newly formed nationalist right-wing Likud coalition seized the opportunity with a strong showing in the 1973 Knesset elections, campaigning on a platform of '[retaining] the West Bank and most of the occupied territories in Sinai, as well as the Golan Heights'.⁷²

Facing a 'hawkish public and challenge of new [sic] pro-annexationist rightwing [sic] alignment,' Labor scrambled to regain the political initiative through a hardening of its own territorial policy,⁷³ particularly in the West Bank and Gaza which had become a locus of Israeli populism given its historical significance as sites of the ancient Israelite kingdoms of Judea and Samaria.⁷⁴ Labor reforms, for example, included an internally divisive decision to approve Kaddum—an illegal

calculations around the airlift, see Elbridge; Cohen Colby, Avner; McCants, William; Morris, Bradley; Rosenau, William, "The Israeli "Nuclear Alert" of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis," (Arlington VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2013).

⁶⁹ Department of State Briefing Memorandum, Strategy for Your March Middle East Trip, March 3, 1975, Briefing Book-Middle East Negotiations, March 1975 (Folder 2), Box 31, Records of Joseph J. Sisco, 1951–1976, General Records of the Department of State, 1763–2002, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, MD, 12.

⁷⁰ Yaniv, *Deterrence without the Bomb*, 15–6.

⁷¹ Israeli Opinion on Interim Agreements in the Sinai and Golan and the U.S. Role: October, 1975, Research Memoranda 1963 – 1999, Box 34, M-14-1975, Records of the U.S. Information Agency, Record Group 306, National Archives at College Park, MD, 7.

⁷² Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis: Israel, 1967 and 1973* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 70; Jacob Eriksson, "Israel and the October War," in *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Legacy, Diplomacy*, ed. Asah Siniver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45–6.

⁷³ Department of State Telegram: Labor Party Policy on Occupied Territories (dated 24 Aug 1973), Ambassador's Subject Files, 1948–1975, Box 3, Occupied Territories, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84, National Archives at College Park, MD, 3.

⁷⁴ Tessler, *A History*, 506–7.

settlement west of Nablus.⁷⁵ Labor took to the 1977 Knesset election a policy of ‘neither return[ing] nor retain[ing] all of the West Bank,’ whereas Likud campaigned, and ultimately won, on a policy of ‘no compromise whatsoever in Judea and Samaria,’⁷⁶ unseating the incumbent Labor government for the first time since Israeli independence.

Once in government, Likud followed through on its commitment to expanding Israeli control in the West Bank and Gaza: it more than doubled the number of West Bank settlements,⁷⁷ announced a twenty-year plan for settling a further two million Israelis in the region,⁷⁸ and formally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980. Though often couching these territorial moves in security terms, Likud was clearly playing to a domestic populist audience. For example, Likud leader Menachem Begin’s first public appearance after the 1977 election was to Kaddum, where he declared the territory ‘the land of liberated Israel’ and gifted the settlement a Torah scroll for a newly constructed synagogue.⁷⁹ The following month, in an address to the Knesset, the government outlined its policy toward the West Bank and Gaza, describing these territories as the ‘eternal historic right’ of the Jewish people and an ‘inalienable legacy’ of their ancestors.⁸⁰

While Likud’s activism was concentrated in the historically and religiously significant West Bank and Gaza, in government the party did not immediately depart from Labor’s land-for-peace policy as it applied to Sinai and the Golan Heights. In July, weeks after taking office, the cabinet decided that, in exchange for peace treaties, Israel would ‘make a significant withdrawal of her forces in Sinai’ and ‘withdraw our forces from their present lines [in the Golan Heights] and redeploy them along a line to be established as the permanent boundary’⁸¹—a more moderate position than it held in 1973.

Likud’s moderation held in Sinai, leading to the Camp David Accords and a 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty that saw the return of Sinai to Cairo (though Israel retained Gaza). Likud’s policy in Golan, however, was not as durable. A well-organised advocacy campaign by Golan Heights settlers elevated the political status of the region to national prominence, including direct appeals to the press and Knesset members, and a 1980 petition for annexing the Golan Heights that was

⁷⁵ Aronson, *Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East*, 324-5; Ann Mosely Lesch, "Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-1977," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 1 (1977).

⁷⁶ As paraphrased in Tessler, *A History*, 502.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁷⁸ Lesch, "Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-1977," 27.

⁷⁹ "Israel: Triumph of a Superhawk," *Time*, <https://time.com/archive/6848697/israel-triumph-of-a-superhawk/>.

⁸⁰ "Israel’s Foreign Policy and the 1977 Parliamentary Elections," in *Israel at the Polls: The Knesset Elections of 1977*, ed. Howard R. Penniman (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979), 272.

⁸¹ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 363-4.

signed by 750,000 citizens, at that time nearly 20% of the population of Israel.⁸² By 1980 popular support for annexing the Golan Heights was over 70%,⁸³ leading ultranationalist party Tehiya to introduce a bill to the Knesset for annexation. Though the bill was struck down, nearly half of Knesset members did not attend the vote, ostensibly to 'avoid voting on a measure to which they objected but did not want to oppose openly.'⁸⁴ The following year the Likud government introduced its own bill for annexing the Golan Heights, which was passed into law.

Begin justified this move publicly on Syria's 'rever[sion] to its hostile and bellicose posture,' despite the fact that Syria was 'scrupulously respecting' a disengagement-of-forces agreement negotiated six years prior, and that UN observers were serving on the Golan Heights with the support of both governments.⁸⁵ Instead, analysts emphasise the domestic political pressures for Likud's policy change in Golan, in particular the need to pacify conservative and pro-settlement constituencies that had mobilised following the signing of the Camp David Accords.⁸⁶

Overall, the Israel-Sinai, Israel-West Bank/Gaza, and Israel-Golan Heights cases offer strong support for nuclear-territorial pragmatism. Firstly, nuclear weapons did not significantly shrink the costs of controlling the territories. While Israel was ostensibly able to leverage its nuclear weapons to bolster its conventional position during the Yom Kippur War, this did not drastically alter the regional balance of forces nor reduce the long-term costs of occupation. Where territorial policy did harden in the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights, strategic considerations appeared peripheral. Instead, domestic politics driven by settler interest groups and shifting popular opinion on negotiating with the Arab states provides a compelling alternative explanation. Whereas in Sinai, where domestic political forces were less active, Israel did offer significant territorial concessions to Egypt, despite explicit recognition of the strategic risk in doing so, with tentative evidence suggesting that Israeli confidence in its nuclear deterrent played at least some role in decision making.

South Africa battles a 'total onslaught'

South Africa emerged as a self-governing dominion in 1910 following the unification of four British colonies. In 1915 the Union of South Africa seized neighbouring Namibia (then 'South

⁸² P. R. Kumaraswamy, "The Golan Heights: Israel's Predicaments," *Strategic Analysis* 23, no. 7 (1999); Yael Yishai, "Israeli Annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights: Factors and Processes," *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1985): 51-3.

⁸³ "Israeli Annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights."

⁸⁴ "Bill to Annex the Golan Heights Defeated in Knesset by 45-14 Vote," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, <https://www.jta.org/archive/bill-to-annex-the-golan-heights-defeated-in-knesset-by-45-14-vote>.

⁸⁵ Tessler, *A History*, 558-9.

⁸⁶ Chaim Herzog, "Golan Annexation: Israeli Comment," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11, no. 3 (1982); Tessler, *A History*, 559.

West Africa') from German colonial forces, administering it as a *de facto* province under a League of Nations mandate. In 1946, Pretoria unsuccessfully appealed to the UN Trusteeship Committee for the incorporation of Namibia into the Union,⁸⁷ and twenty years later—by which time the Union had formed the independent Republic of South Africa (RSA)—the General Assembly voted to terminate the League of Nations mandate and place Namibia under the 'direct responsibility' of the UN,⁸⁸ a measure endorsed by the Security Council in 1969 through Resolution 264.⁸⁹

Ignoring the UN ruling, Pretoria remained in Namibia, fomenting an insurgency under the leadership of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and their military wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), with the goal of establishing an independent Namibian state. SWAPO based itself in neighbouring states (principally Angola and Zambia) from which it launched hit-and-run attacks against South Africa Defence Force (SADF) troops based in Namibia. Following the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola in 1975, SWAPO received increased support from the new socialist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) regime in Luanda and its Soviet and Cuban patrons in the form of training, logistics, arms, and sanctuary in southern Angola,⁹⁰ allowing it to scale up insurgent activities.⁹¹

Accordingly, the SADF increased troop deployments along the Namib-Angolan border, conducted cross-border military operations targeting SWAPO bases and supply lines in southern Angola, and co-opted armed Angolan anti-MPLA groups—namely the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA)—who were themselves vying for political control in the newly liberated Angola. As the Border War (as it became known) intensified, Angolan regular forces increasingly fought alongside SWAPO insurgents,⁹² including engagements involving heavy armour and air defence systems.⁹³ Cuba also began pouring regular forces into Angola to establish defensive lines protecting central Angola,

⁸⁷ James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security 1945-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22-3; Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (Johannesburg: Macmillan South Africa, 1984), 8.

⁸⁸ U.N. G.A. Res. 2145(XXI) (27 October 1966).

⁸⁹ S.C. Res. 264 (20 March 1969).

⁹⁰ Kersti Larsdotter, "Fighting Transnational Insurgents: The South African Defence Force in Namibia, 1966–1989," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 12 (2014); Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot "Cold War": The USSR in Southern Africa* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), 201-31.

⁹¹ Tim Stapleton, "'Tracking, Tracking and More Tracking Was Their Motto': Bush Tracking and Warfare in Late Twentieth-Century Southern Africa," *War & Society* 34, no. 4 (2016): 313.; Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, 126-27, 97-203.

⁹² Hilton Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-Era Military Generals* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001), 98; Robert Scott Jaster, *The Defence of White Power: South African Foreign Policy under Pressure* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 94-5.

⁹³ Robert S. Jaster, "South Africa and Its Neighbours: The Dynamics of Regional Conflict," *The Adelphi Papers* 26, no. 209 (1986): 10, 19-20.

reaching a peak of 55,000,⁹⁴ while the Soviet Union sent billions of dollars of military aid and thousands of advisors into Angola.⁹⁵

SWAPO's alignment with the Soviet Union and the influx of Cuban forces into Angola turned an insurgency into an existential threat to South Africa.⁹⁶ South Africa's fiercely anti-Soviet National Party, which ruled South Africa from 1948, perceived that the Soviet Union was orchestrating a Communist takeover of southern Africa by co-opting local insurgencies, inculcating them with Communist ideology, and installing them as puppet regimes in southern African states as European colonial authorities retreated from Africa.⁹⁷ Pretoria feared that forfeiting Namibia would leave an open door for Soviet-aligned SWAPO, and that Soviet and aligned forces would use SWAPO-controlled Namibia as a staging ground for an attack on South Africa proper.⁹⁸

Nuclear weapons offer little

Amidst concerns of a Soviet-led 'total onslaught' against South Africa,⁹⁹ in the late 1970s Prime Minister Balthazar Johannes Vorster instructed the South African Atomic Energy Board to develop a 'secret nuclear deterrent'¹⁰⁰ utilising enriched uranium produced at its *Valindaba* site west of Pretoria.¹⁰¹ South Africa's first operational nuclear weapon, constructed in 1982, was a prototype 6kT device which could 'be kicked out the back of a plane' as an unguided bomb.¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Shubin, *The Hot "Cold War"*, 109.

⁹⁵ Director of Central Intelligence, *Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects, Special National Intelligence Estimate*, Snie 71/11-85 (1985); Vladimir Shubin, "Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa," *Cold War History* 7, no. 2 (2007).

⁹⁶ This was not a traditional territorial dispute: the competing claim to South African sovereignty over Namibia was subnational (SWAPO), making it conceptually closer to insurgency or civil war. Still, in terms of South African nuclear weapons acquisition (discussed further below), I treat it as a legitimate test of nuclear-territorial pragmatism, because South African nuclear acquisition should theoretically have lowered both the costs and the benefits of control in Namibia. On costs: SWAPO depended heavily on Cuban, Angolan, and Soviet support, so the campaign for Namibia entailed politico-military competition with those states in addition to SWAPO. This left many mechanisms of cost reduction—including those guaranteed by the threat of nuclear use—viable. On benefits: the South African rationale for occupation in Namibia was to forestall a Soviet-led attack on the South African homeland. Reducing the likelihood of this (i.e. through nuclear deterrence) would logically reduce the benefits of occupation.

⁹⁷ Deon Geldenhuys, "Some Foreign Policy Implications of South Africa's "Total National Strategy", with Particular Reference to the "12-Point Plan", (Braamfontein, South Africa: The South African Institute of International Affairs, 1981), 2-8.

⁹⁸ For South African officials describing this threat, see Pik Botha, interview by Pdraig O'Malley, 4 Feb, 1999; Robert S. Jaster, "South Africa's Narrowing Security Options," *The Adelphi Papers* 20, no. 159 (2008): 28; *House of Assembly Debates*, 21 March 1980, 3321.

⁹⁹ Robert S Jaster, *South Africa in Namibia: The Botha Strategy* (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 1985), 26.

¹⁰⁰ David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *Revisiting South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Program: Its History, Dismantlement, and Lessons for Today* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) Press, 2016), 13-17; David Albright, "South Africa and the Affordable Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 50, no. 4 (1994): 43; Peter Liberman, "The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 50-54; Helen E. Purkitt and Stephen F. Burgess, *South Africa's Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 26-57.

¹⁰¹ Thomas B. Cochran, "Highly Enriched Uranium Production for South African Nuclear Weapons," *Science & Global Security* 4, no. 2 (1994).

¹⁰² Albright, "South Africa and the Affordable Bomb," 43.

From 1986 to 1989, South Africa built a further five ‘smart’ television-guided glide bombs with yields approximating 20kT.¹⁰³

According to analysis by Mark Bell, Pretoria saw its nuclear weapons as a way to stifle escalation of the Border War. Specifically, if the conflict escalated to the point where Angolan or Cuban forces were crossing into Namibia, Pretoria could threaten a nuclear test to push the United States—which held an interest in preventing a public South African nuclear breakout—to intervene in the conflict (the coercion mechanism).¹⁰⁴ US involvement would immediately raise the risks of further aggression by Soviet-aligned forces, hopefully (for Pretoria) causing them to withdraw across the Cunene River.¹⁰⁵ This effective tamper on conflict escalation could have reduced the costs to South Africa of fighting the Border War. Specifically, it would enable the SADF to engage in bolder and operationally advantageous activities in southern Angola with a lesser risk of cross-border activities escalating to a general war. Indeed, there are indicators that South Africa was pursuing bolder operations in Angola in the nuclear era: SWAPO losses increased,¹⁰⁶ the SADF shifted from raiding to occupying territory inside Angola,¹⁰⁷ and the SADF increasingly engaged Angolan and Cuban regular forces (i.e. in addition to SWAPO insurgents).¹⁰⁸

Importantly, however, any such gains in freedom of action in southern Angola were not decisive. Ongoing infusions of Soviet equipment and Cuban troops meant that Angolan forces were eventually able to push into UNITA-controlled southern Angola and deprive the SADF of air superiority.¹⁰⁹ Jaster notes that, by late-1987, South Africa ‘was incurring far higher costs and risks than before. With Cuban combat forces deployed through southern Angola, the Botha Administration faced the prospect that future SADF incursions would result in SADF casualties on a scale likely to cause serious criticism of the policy by white South Africans.’¹¹⁰ The loss of air superiority in particular ‘convinced leading strategists of the security establishment in South Africa that a military solution to the conflict would be too costly, and that instead a negotiated end to the protracted war might be a face-saving option.’¹¹¹

¹⁰³ Ibid.; Jeffrey Lewis to Arms Control Wonk, December 3, 2015, <http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1200544/revisiting-south-africas-bomb/>; Liberman, "Rise and Fall.";

¹⁰⁴ See the ‘catalytic deterrent posture’ in Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, esp. 15-7.

¹⁰⁵ Albright and Stricker, *Revisiting South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Program*, 144-5; Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, 80, 91-4.

¹⁰⁶ Leopold Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War: An Appraisal of the South African Strategy," *Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 39.

¹⁰⁷ Jaster, "South Africa and Its Neighbours," 10.

¹⁰⁸ Jaster, *The Defence of White Power*, 94-5; Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War," 43-4.

¹⁰⁹ Jaster, "South Africa and Its Neighbours," 65-7.

¹¹⁰ Jaster, *The Defence of White Power*, 102.

¹¹¹ Robin E. Möser, *Disarming Apartheid: The End of South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Programme and Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 105.

Additionally, South Africa's inchoate nuclear weapons capability did little to allay South African concerns about an ultimate Soviet-led play on South Africa proper. None of South Africa's weapons could range the Soviet or Cuban capitals, meaning that Pretoria could not credibly threaten either state with nuclear retaliation were it cross the Orange River. Instead, the only realistic use case was counterforce strikes against advancing Soviet-backed forces,¹¹² an option that President Pieter Willem Botha described as 'suicide.'¹¹³ Some in Pretoria had even suggested that it would be 'better to throw in the towel, and let the Soviet Union take us' than to counter a Soviet attack with a limited nuclear attack, as 'The Soviet Union would have every excuse then to actually attack us with nuclear weapons. We were no match for that. Then we would still lose, but we would destroy the country and the people as well.'¹¹⁴

South Africa finds a way out

With international support for Namibian independence, the pouring of Communist forces and materiel into Angola, and the elusiveness of a military solution to the Border War, the South African occupation imposed enormous costs on Pretoria, causing it to progressively soften its position. By the time of South African nuclear weapons acquisition, Pretoria had already committed to abandoning annexation¹¹⁵ and supporting Namibian independence, though negotiations were hampered by Pretoria premising a South African withdrawal from Namibia on the removal of Soviet and Cuban forces from Angola.¹¹⁶ '[T]he minute this happens,' said President Botha in 1985, 'I will be prepared to settle all our military forces inside South Africa.'¹¹⁷

In May 1988, Soviet troops began withdrawing from Afghanistan following the signing of the Geneva Accords. Perceiving a window for a similar outcome in southern Africa,¹¹⁸ in December 1988 South Africa, Angola, and Cuba signed the Tripartite Accord, providing for Namibian independence and a phased withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. Both actions were completed, with Namibia declaring independence in March 1990.¹¹⁹ Importantly for the present discussion, this South African territorial concession came because the withdrawal of Communist

¹¹² Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, 93.

¹¹³ Liberman, "Rise and Fall," 57. See also Albright and Stricker, *Revisiting South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Program*, 292; Albright, "South Africa and the Affordable Bomb," 37.

¹¹⁴ Liberman, "Rise and Fall," 57.

¹¹⁵ Gerhard Totemeyer, *South West Africa/Namibia: Facts, Attitudes, Assessment, and Prospects* (Randburg: Fokus Suid Publishers, 1977), 30.

¹¹⁶ Jaster, *South Africa in Namibia*, 6-9.

¹¹⁷ Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, 314.

¹¹⁸ Pik Botha, interview by Padraig O'Malley, 24 Aug, 1992.

¹¹⁹ Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, 342-44.

forces from Angola (and not nuclear deterrence) had reduced the spectre of a Soviet-led attack against South Africa.

Overall, the South Africa-Namibia case offers strong support for nuclear-territorial pragmatism. As with the Israeli cases, nuclear weapons did not significantly shrink the costs of controlling the disputed territory. While evidence suggests that nuclear weapons did give the SADF greater freedom of action in southern Angola, this was not enough to stem the enormous costs of occupation. Also consistent with nuclear-territorial pragmatism, the immaturity of South Africa's nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis the mighty (and distant) Soviet Union left it with little confidence that it could defend against a Soviet-led attack across the Orange River. With nuclear weapons offering little deterrent utility, South Africa continued to view Namibia as an important strategic buffer, only relinquishing control once the Soviet threat had receded.

Conclusions

Efforts to explain the effects of nuclear weapons on states' foreign policies toward territorial disputes have split between the works of the TNR and the revolution sceptics. Proponents of the TNR argue that the unique ability of nuclear weapons to deter external aggression provides nuclear-armed states the strategic space to compromise on other sources of national security, including territory, thereby enabling compromise in territorial disputes. Whereas the revolution sceptics argue that enduring concerns around conventional conflict, the nuclear balance, and relative gains compel nuclear-armed states to maintain and even expand contests for disputed territory. Both approaches offer critical insights, though struggle to explain variation in the empirical record: nuclear-armed states engage in both aggression and conciliation in territorial disputes. Seeking to explain the range of choices that nuclear-armed states make in territorial disputes, this paper advanced a novel theory of nuclear weapons and territorial disputes—nuclear-territorial pragmatism—that bridges these two theoretical approaches.

The core claim of nuclear-territorial pragmatism is that nuclear-armed states will shift the burden of national security from territory to nuclear deterrence, facilitating compromise in territorial disputes, but only when that state's nuclear deterrent is mature and domestic politics are permissive to territorial compromise. Case studies of territorial disputes engaged by nuclear-armed Israel and South Africa offer empirical support for the theoretical expectations of nuclear-territorial pragmatism: nuclear weapons can reduce the costs of controlling disputed territory, though these cost-savings are generally limited; nuclear-armed states may view nuclear deterrence as a credible strategic alternative to territory; domestic politics can override strategic decision making in policy

toward disputed territory; states with immature nuclear weapons capabilities continue to view territory as an important strategic asset; and nuclear-armed states with mature nuclear deterrents and permissive domestic politics do make concessions in territorial disputes.

The strong performance of nuclear-territorial pragmatism in this study carries several implications for scholarship on nuclear proliferation and regional security. First, it offers a corrective to the revolution sceptic literature that broadly discounts the TNR as a ‘myth’¹²⁰ and ‘failure.’¹²¹ In the domain of territorial disputes, at least, when controlling for domestic politics and nuclear weapons development, this study suggests that states may behave more consistently with the expectations of the TNR than is widely recognised. Importantly, however, this should not be understood as a claim that nuclear weapons necessarily make the world safer.¹²² According to the theory, a nuclear-armed state’s willingness to make concessions in territorial disputes is contingent on the development of a mature nuclear weapons capability and depoliticization of the conflict, both of which can be high bars to hit.

Case evidence presented in this paper adds to the growing scholarly debate on the material, doctrinal, and psychological requirements of nuclear deterrence by demonstrating how nuclear-armed states perceive such requirements.¹²³ This study demonstrates that states are unlikely to perceive that their core interests are protected by a small, unsophisticated nuclear arsenal, i.e. ‘existential deterrence.’¹²⁴ As shown in the South Africa case, states may prefer to ‘throw in the towel’ than to stake deterrence on an arsenal that isn’t up to the job. At the same time, that nuclear-armed states can make territorial concessions—observed in both cases—mitigates against claims that nuclear-armed states are endlessly hedging against unfavourable changes in the conventional and nuclear balance, specifically through territorial expansion.¹²⁵

Nuclear-territorial pragmatism further demonstrates the importance of incorporating domestic politics into reasoning regarding the political effects of nuclear weapons. Admittedly, territorial disputes are an easy case for demonstrating the impact of domestic politics given their unique ability to mobilise and focus domestic political interest groups. But as the Israel case shows, domestic politics can override strategic calculations on the pursuit of security with nuclear weapons, suggesting a theoretical relevance beyond territorial disputes to other domains of security-seeking

¹²⁰ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*.

¹²¹ Green, *The Revolution That Failed*.

¹²² See Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better."

¹²³ For an overview, see Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 33-41.

¹²⁴ Devin T. Hagerty, "The Power of Suggestion: Opaque Proliferation, Existential Deterrence, and the South Asian Nuclear Arms Competition," *Security Studies* 2, no. 3-4 (1993).

¹²⁵ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 66-119.

behaviour, for example, conflict initiation,¹²⁶ alliance management,¹²⁷ arms control,¹²⁸ and crisis negotiations.¹²⁹

In addition to the above scholarly contributions, this paper carries implications for policy. Specifically, nuclear-territorial pragmatism identifies promising levers for deescalating territorial disputes involving nuclear-armed states. Specifically, efforts to demobilise a nuclear-armed belligerent's irredentist constituencies and signal vulnerability to its nuclear weapons could provide that belligerent with the strategic space to shift the burden of national security from territorial conquest to nuclear deterrence, facilitating territorial compromise. Efforts to promote peace in Ukraine, for example, might emphasise strategic arms limitation agreements covering Russia and NATO, as well as face-saving concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Nuclear-territorial pragmatism also provides insight into how potential nuclear weapons states are likely to behave toward territorial disputes if they were to cross the nuclear Rubicon, providing direction to non-proliferation interest groups that must increasingly pick their battles as non-proliferation resources are stretched and interventions to prevent nuclear proliferation entail greater risks.¹³⁰ In the context of the Kuril Islands territorial dispute, for example, a hypothetical Japanese nuclear breakout would receive high priority in this framework as powerful irredentist interest groups¹³¹ and Japan's inevitable difficulty in establishing meaningful nuclear deterrence against the world's largest nuclear arsenal will theoretically drive Japanese efforts to consolidate territorial control against determined Russian opposition, risking an escalation in the conflict.

¹²⁶ Bell and Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict."; Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo, "Bargaining, Nuclear Proliferation, and Interstate Disputes," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009). For a theory of nuclear weapons and interstate disputes that incorporates domestic politics, see Rizwan Asghar, "Nuclear Weapons and Interstate Conflict Behavior: The Moderating Influence of Civil–Military Relations," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2024).

¹²⁷ Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, esp. 16-18; Matthew Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb: Technology Transfer and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 101-3.

¹²⁸ Green, *The Revolution That Failed*.

¹²⁹ Cohen, *When Proliferation Causes Peace*.

¹³⁰ Sammy Westfall, "The Cost of the Iran War Is Mounting. Here's the Latest Tally," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/08/07/cost-iran-war-is-mounting-heres-latest-tally/>.

¹³¹ Alexander Bukh, "Constructing Japan's 'Northern Territories': Domestic Actors, Interests, and the Symbolism of the Disputed Islands," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 12, no. 3 (2012).