

Excerpt from “Incentivizing non-proliferation”

David Cortright and Thomas Biersteker, in *Sanctions for Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation*, eds. Armand Bekaj and Peter Wallensteen (London and New York), Routledge, 2024

An examination of the reasons states reversed nuclear weapons policies in the past can help to shape nonproliferation policies for the future. A review of the cases reveals that nuclear reversals have been the result of security guarantees and improvements in regional and global security. They are also influenced by nonproliferation gestures from neighboring states or potential adversaries,¹ domestic political dynamics toward global integration, and the offer of inducements from external actors, principally the United States.²

A number of major studies have reviewed these dynamics. One of the most robust is the 2014 quantitative analysis in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* by Philipp Bleek and Eric Lorber.³ Their findings show that security guarantees are effective at persuading states that have not yet launched a nuclear weapons program to refrain from doing so. For states that have already started to develop a nuclear program, however, the extension of security guarantees has less impact in deterring them from acquiring weapons capability. Security guarantees are an “arrow in the quiver,” Bleek and Lorber write, but they are “not a nonproliferation panacea.” They need to be supplemented with other policy tools.

Other scholars concur. In the summary to the important edited volume *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation*, James Wirtz writes, “Assurance strategies have been most effective when they are part of a larger package involving positive incentives or broader efforts at reassurance, or when they supplement other developments such as good political relations among allies or a country’s embrace of norms against nuclear weapons.”⁴ In their examination of proliferation decisions in 37 states, Harald Müller and Andreas Schmidt confirm that security issues are significant considerations in determining nuclear decision-making, but they trace the successes of nonproliferation policy to a broader set of inducement strategies employed by the United States and other leading states.⁵ The history of nonproliferation teaches that nations can be persuaded to give up nuclear weapons programs if political leaders acquire the belief that nuclear weapons are not in their national interest and will be counterproductive to their purposes. Positive incentives are more likely to be effective in that process than military pressure and comprehensive sanctions regimes.

Coercive disarmament worked only once, in the exceptional and extremely costly case of Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s, the result of war, massive bombing of the country's infrastructure and years of draconian comprehensive UN sanctions, initially introduced to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The work of weapons inspectors with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Special Commission was also significant for the achievement of disarmament goals in Iraq.⁶ In other cases where coercive approaches and threats of force were employed, nonproliferation goals were not fully achieved. Sanctions have been imposed in a few cases to counter proliferation, but they have never been successful on their own. Rather, it is often the offer to ease or lift sanctions that has been a significant factor in motivating states to move toward the nonnuclear path.

Only when states realize they have more to gain from a nonnuclear future than they might lose in developing such weapons will they choose to abandon their pursuit. These are calculations that states must make for themselves. They cannot be imposed externally. The domestic political calculus of expected costs and benefits – often measured in terms of regime survival – is decisive in nonproliferation decision-making processes. It is likely to be influenced more by rewards and inducements than by threats and penalties alone. The sanctions literature generally concludes that threats of sanctions are more effective in inducing political change than the actual imposition of sanctions,⁷ but there is also evidence that the offer to ease sanctions can induce policy change in some instances.⁸

Beyond coercing a change in behavior, sanctions also have an important signaling function in upholding nonproliferation norms. The signaling is both to proliferating states and to other states that might be contemplating nuclear weapons programs as they observe the consequences of sanctions on norm violators.⁹ Sanctions can also raise the costs of proliferation, block imports of weapons-related goods and technology, and generally constrain the process of acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

Their greatest significance, though, often comes in combination with incentives to facilitate a negotiated settlement, with the offer to ease sanctions serving as a potent inducement and form of bargaining leverage. The evidence suggests that the combination of incentives and sanctions is more effective than the use of either sanctions or incentives alone.¹⁰ The art of diplomacy lies in creatively blending pressures and inducements, sticks and carrots, to exert persuasive influence and provide benefits for states that choose to abandon the nuclear option.

The bargaining approach should be supplemented by efforts to reduce the perceived need for weapons. As Leon Sigal writes, “the interdiction of supply has to be supplemented by efforts to reduce demand.”¹¹ This means addressing the security concerns that often drive

the proliferation impulse. Security assurances play an essential role in this process through alliance guarantees and offers of protection in the event of aggression. It is also important to recognize the negative consequences of threats and overly militarized approaches. Trying to further isolate or coerce an insecure regime could backfire. In these settings economic and diplomatic engagement and the willingness to offer security assurances are more likely to be successful.

In his explanation for the success of the nonproliferation regime, Jeffrey Kaplow focuses on the power of reciprocity and the willingness of states to forego the nuclear weapons option if other states are doing the same. His analysis tracks the influence of overall regime compliance on the policy making of individual states. He finds that the willingness of states to participate in the nonproliferation regime is related to the restrictions it places on the nuclear ambitions of other states. Governments make decisions to join and comply with the nonproliferation regime on the basis of the regime's track record of success, and on patterns of punishment or acceptance for violations of the regime. The monitoring and verification dimensions of the nonproliferation regime have strengthened over the years, giving states access to greater information about the behavior of others, and greater assurance that their commitment to participate is being reciprocated.¹² The threat of sanctions and isolation from the global economy for noncompliance adds encouragement for states to cooperate.

¹ Jeffrey M. Kaplow, *Signing Away the Bomb: The Surprising Success of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

² Vipin Narang, *Seeking the Bomb: Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022). Narang terms this as insurance to "hedgers."

³ Philipp C. Bleek and Eric B. Lorber, "Security Guarantees and Allied Nuclear Proliferation," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (April 2014), 447.

⁴ James Wirtz, "Conclusion," in Jeffrey W. Knopf, editor, *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 277.

⁵ Harald Müller and Andreas Schmidt, "The Little Known Story of De-Proliferation: Why States Give Up Nuclear Weapons Activities," in William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, editors, *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century. The Role of Theory*, Vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 124–158.

⁶ George A. Lopez and David Cortright, "Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked," *Foreign Affairs* Vol 83, No. 4 (July-August, 2004), 90-103.

⁷ Jon, R. Hovi, Huseby, and Detlof Sprinz (2005) "When Do (Imposed) Economic Sanctions Work?" *World Politics* 57(4): 479.

⁸ Thomas Biersteker, Rebecca Brubaker & David Lanz, "Exploring the Relationship between UN Sanctions and Mediation," *Global Governance* 28, No. 2 (July, 2022), 180-202.

⁹ Nicholas L. Miller (2014) "The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions" *International Organization* 68 (4): 913-44.

¹⁰ Han Dorussen, "Mixing Carrots with Sticks: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Positive Incentives," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 38, No. 2 (March 2001), 251-162.

¹¹ Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4.

¹² Jeffrey M. Kaplow, *Signing Away the Bomb: The Surprising Success of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 7, 9.