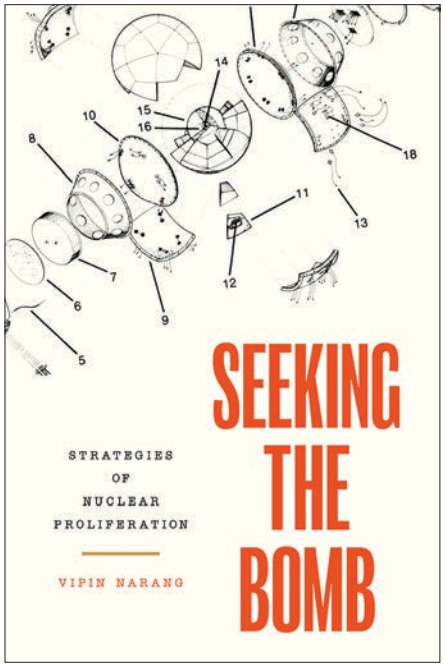

Seeking the Bomb: Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation

By Vipin Narang
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Reviewed by Tobias Bernard Switzer

After nearly 80 years of scholarship on nuclear weapons, one might understandably believe that all the important issues have been addressed, if not settled. However, Vipin Narang, professor of political science at MIT, has a knack for asking and answering questions that other nuclear strategy researchers have overlooked. Whereas most academic work looks at superpowers, Narang's book *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014) examines how the strategic deterrence postures of non-superpower nuclear states differ from those of superpowers. And now, in his latest, *Seeking the Bomb*, he extracts insights from studying the various ways states pursue nuclear weapons, discovering that most would-be nuclear powers take different proliferation paths than Great Power states.

By examining all the successful and unsuccessful cases of nuclear proliferation, Narang develops his Proliferation Security Theory to model a state's path to the bomb. Taking the form of a decision tree, the theory begins with a state that has already decided to develop nuclear weapons. A series of binary questions—about security threats, defense treaties, domestic political consensus, vulnerability to intervention, and superpower protection—leads a state to one of four optimal strategies: sprinting, hiding, sheltered pursuit, and hedging.

Sprinting and hiding are the most straightforward proliferation strategies. *Sprinting* is an open dash to the bomb as fast as a state's economic and scientific legs can carry it. Unencumbered by threats from the international community, sprinters are untouchable. Although the academic literature assumes sprinting to be the default strategy, Narang points out that it is available only to major powers, all of which already have nuclear weapons.

Hiding—the strategy of building nuclear weapons without discovery—is a complicated and high-risk endeavor that invites violent reprisals and crippling sanctions. It is, however, the only option for pariah states and for states like Taiwan and South Korea that have been caught up in a security tango between nuclear superpowers. Of the 10 states that have tried to develop the bomb in secret, Narang found that only apartheid-era South Africa was able to do it successfully.

Interestingly, *Seeking the Bomb* has a subtle, almost hidden message beyond nuclear proliferation. In discussing the final two strategies—sheltered pursuit and hedging—Narang embeds a fascinating commentary on *reverse leverage*. Throughout the history of nuclear proliferation, several weaker states have been able to exploit a Great Power—usually, the United States—to gain access to the bomb or other concessions. *Seeking the Bomb* demonstrates that a supported state can sometimes find unique leverage despite its dependence on a client, or perhaps even because of that dependence.

The *sheltered pursuit* strategy entails the temporary protection of a vulnerable state by a major power, providing a window of opportunity to pursue nuclear weapons. The three countries that used this proliferation strategy—Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan—offer a sobering lesson. Narang argues convincingly that each state was able to calculate and seize a moment when its more powerful partner was conflicted or distracted and used the opportunity to develop nuclear weapons. For Israel and Pakistan, the United States went against its nonproliferation commitments because of its short-term desire to gain access to the Middle East (in the case of Israel) and to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan (in the case of Pakistan). And despite North Korea's absolute dependence on China for survival, the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea keeping the United States and South Korea at bay seemed like a tolerable tradeoff to the Chinese. In all three cases, the United States and China could have stopped these sheltered pursuers but chose not to, raising the question of what opportunities for reverse leverage exist today or in the future. Narang hints that Saudi Arabia and Turkey might be only one or two cards short of the reverse leverage needed to play the sheltered pursuer hand.

The final proliferation strategy, hedging, has three forms: technical, insurance, and hard. Each involves deliberately stopping short of the bomb. *Hedging* reduces the time needed to develop nuclear weapons later. *Technical hedgers* do not have a pressing security threat, so they develop nuclear infrastructure like nuclear energy or research facilities but go no further. *Insurance hedgers* have intense security threats but enjoy formal defense treaties with a major nuclear power. They maintain robust conventional militaries and the capability to ramp up enrichment and develop weapons but hold off on doing so. In Narang's discussion of Japan and West Germany as *insurance hedgers*, leverage and reverse leverage are major factors.

West Germany was able to reverse-leverage the United States into loaning it nuclear weapons, thereby exploiting the Americans' desire to manage escalation

dynamics on the European continent. Partly as a hedge against abandonment, both West Germany and Japan developed robust civilian nuclear sectors and militaries, which could shorten the time to weaponization. Narang believes that Japan—similar to West Germany during the Cold War—enjoys *reverse leverage* today, which it could parlay into a similar nuclear weapons–sharing arrangement now or in the future.

Finally, *hard hedgers* have a severe security threat but no superpower defense treaty, and—central to Narang's theory—they also lack a domestic consensus about whether to go all the way. *Seeking the Bomb* offers the post–World War II stories of Switzerland and Sweden as prime examples. Lacking membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, these countries each faced the Soviet Union alone, leading them to pursue nuclear weapons until the late 1960s. Ultimately, what held them back was not technical challenges or foreign interference but ambivalence about whether the route led to the ultimate strategic deterrent or destabilization.

Internal politics, Narang believes, is the key policy lesson from *Seeking the Bomb*. Fractured political support causes states to refrain from fully developing nuclear weapons. This presents an opportunity for nonproliferation states to influence potential proliferators. Narang admits that lamentably, he lacks a generalized theory about domestic consensus-making, and this is one of the book's most underdeveloped parts.

Although the topic of domestic consensus is one part of *Seeking the Bomb* that needs more specificity, there are other problems. Narang presents his Proliferation Security Theory model as if it had more rigor than it does. First, he uses recursive logic in his decision tree. A state comes to the decision to pursue nuclear weapons because of hostile neighbors, real or perceived, but the first node in the theory asks if there is an acute security threat. Second, Narang's assertion that the existence of a formal security pact is what guides a state down the proliferation path is problematic. The signed paper is unimportant. What truly affects a state's strategic decision is the belief in the protector to fulfill the pact's promise.

These holes make Narang's theory a heuristic, not a testable statistical model. Regardless, *Seeking the Bomb* is well-written and rich with ideas that will significantly interest those focused on nonproliferation. Narang's case studies are captivating, and they more than support his central argument that there are many paths to the bomb. *Seeking the Bomb*'s findings should be immensely valuable to policymakers, arms control researchers, and intelligence analysts trying to limit access to the nuclear club. **JFQ**

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