

## **Behind the Allure lies a Terrible Irony**

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The recent allegations that Myanmar has started to develop a nuclear weapons programme appear to have surprised no one. In a similar vein, no one was surprised when the first news of a nuclear weapons programme in North Korea emerged. If a country is led by a paranoid government eternally suspicious of just about every other state in the international system, then nuclear weapons will surely be the ultimate guarantor of that country's national security.

Two arguments have traditionally been made in favour of nuclear weapons. One, they are the Ultimate Weapon, as nuclear strategist Bernard Brodie called them in 1946.

There is something viscerally certain, even iconic, about the nuclear mushroom cloud. The plot of the 21st century re-imagining of the classic 1970s television series *Battlestar Galactica* is evidence of that: two civilisations, both capable of faster-than-light travel, seek to destroy each other with nuclear weapons. This premise reflects the emotive power that nuclear weapons exercise over the human imagination.

Two, nuclear weapons offer an apparently cost-effective alternative to the otherwise expensive business of acquiring and maintaining armed forces. Manpower costs typically eat up a big part of defence budgets. A nuclear weapons programme offers the prospect of significantly downsizing armed forces and making significant cuts in defence spending; it can also have civilian energy spin-offs. For states with nuclear ambitions - the so-called nuclear wannabes - these arguments appear to be very persuasive.

Two key arguments relate to how nuclear weapons enhance national security. In one scenario, a nuclear state faces potential aggression from a non-nuclear state. Here, it is possible to argue that the mere possession of a nuclear weapon should be sufficient to act as a deterrent against external aggression. It would be tempting to ascribe this state of affairs to Israel - which has been long suspected of having a nuclear weapons programme - vis-a-vis its relations with its Arab neighbours.

This scenario is, however, problematic. Any nuclear retaliation against a conventional military offensive would cross a threshold that has remained intact since 1945. It would render the nuclear state a pariah, likely to face a variety of very severe sanctions imposed by the international community.

The second argument involves threats to the nuclear wannabe's existence from an existing nuclear state. The argument is that for the nuclear wannabe, the possession of nuclear weapons will deter any aggression from other nuclear states, and therefore provide the country with a measure of national security.

After all, as one Indian general was alleged to have remarked, the signal lesson of Operation Iraqi Freedom is that if one wishes to go up against the United States, one had better make sure one has a nuclear weapon.

There are many misconceptions about nuclear deterrence and national security in strategic analysis. What deters aggression between two nuclear powers is not the

fact that both are nuclear powers. If that were the case, all nuclear powers would only need to maintain one nuclear weapon in their arsenal. The fact that this is not the case suggests that nuclear deterrence is rather complicated.

A nuclear wannabe that genuinely believes nuclear weapons will enhance its security will bear in mind two considerations. One is retaliation. What maintains the peace between two adversarial nuclear states is the fear that one may attack first, but the victim will still have nuclear weapons that survive the first strike. These weapons will then be sufficient for the victim to launch a retaliatory attack against the aggressor, and inflict on the aggressor levels of damage that would be politically unacceptable.

This means the nuclear wannabe will need either a very extensive nuclear arsenal, or it will need to ensure that its nuclear arsenal is survivable - either by storing them in hardened nuclear silos or by deploying them on mobile, difficult-to-detect platforms such as missile submarines. Neither option is cheap.

The second critical element in nuclear deterrence is that of sufficient warning. This typically - but not exclusively - applies in the case of states with very small nuclear arsenals that are not likely to survive a nuclear first strike. In this case, the state must have the capacity to react quickly in the event of a nuclear attack, and launch its nuclear weapons against the aggressor before its arsenal is destroyed.

To ensure this capacity, the nuclear wannabe will have to undertake serious investments in geostationary satellites that can monitor the nuclear weapon facilities of its putative adversaries, as well as build advanced command and control facilities that would allow it to launch its nuclear weapons quickly. Again, these are not cheap options.

All this means that the mere possession of even a handful of nuclear weapons is not enough. Nuclear weapons do not constitute a cheap, cost-effective security system for a country. Ironically, a state that genuinely desires to acquire nuclear weapons will make itself more vulnerable to external attacks than ever before.

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