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Paul C. Avey. "Who's Afraid of the Bomb? The Role of Nuclear Non-Use Norms in Confrontations between Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Opponents." *Security Studies* 24:4 (October-December 2015): 563-596. DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2015.1103128.

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Paul C. Avey has done international security scholars a tremendous service with his research on the role played by nuclear non-use norms in military confrontations. In "Who's Afraid of the Bomb?," Avery takes on a key question that has seen surprisingly little attention to date: to what extent do non-nuclear states disregard the credibility of nuclear weapons due to normative considerations? After all, we have good reason to think that norms influence the desirability and use of nuclear weapons. No nuclear weapon has been detonated over an enemy target since 1945. Only a handful of states actually possess nuclear weapons today. And those that aggressively seek nuclear weapons—like North Korea—have such low standing among many other states as to have pariah status. It thus stands to reason that no state would want to commit the outrage associated with delivering the first nuclear attack since the Second World War. Adversaries—especially non-nuclear adversaries—should discount being targets of such an attack in fights against nuclear-armed states.

Despite our intuition that such norms constrain the behavior of nuclear states, Avey finds that non-nuclear states cannot be so optimistic. Examining case studies on Egypt in 1973 and Iraq in 1990, he finds that Egyptian and Iraqi leaders contemplated the use of nuclear weapons against them and so made preparations

intended to minimize the risk of nuclear strike and to limit damage. These leaders both made cost-benefit calculations that accounted for nuclear weapons use by their adversaries, Israel in the Egyptian case and the United States in the Iraqi case. These same leaders did not seem to believe that a norm of nuclear non-use prevented their more capable opponents from using such weapons. To make his case, Avey draws on a body of primary and secondary sources that give unique insights into the decision-making of those non-nuclear states.

I am largely convinced of the argument and so have few quibbles with Avey's analysis. Avey addresses a big question in a clear and thoughtful manner. He handles alternative explanations deftly but makes his own case in a manner that is aware of certain methodological difficulties. The result is a thought-provoking, honest piece of scholarship. And so rather than critique his argument, I wonder to what extent it can be pushed further. As such, I raise several issues that flow from Avey's work.

The first is that Avey's question is only of interest insofar as we can distinguish between nuclear and conventional weapons. As Avey notes, the fact that we accept this premise in academia and policy discussions speaks to the power of norms. Nevertheless, it is increasingly debatable whether military organizations like NATO accept this distinction. Even if this distinction were once true, it could be the case that such trends in technology as nuclear modernization and miniaturization—as sanctioned by policy-makers—are rendering this distinction less relevant. If either or both of these points are correct, then Avey's finding should not surprise. Though Avey does show that non-nuclear states understand that nuclear use would elicit international opprobrium, the military behavior of those states suggests that these organizations believe that nuclear weapons have strategic value on the battlefield. Perhaps the normative distinction between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons is not as tight in practice as commonly presumed. Regardless, the question of where conventional ends and nuclear begins has become all the more urgent.

The second is a possible rejoinder in response to Avey's analysis. Constructivists might claim that Avey's finding is understandable given that the non-use norm remains weak in the international system. The non-use norm does not have the taken-for-granted quality that it should have. Indeed, it is partly for this reason that some international observers and analysts call on the United States to declare a no-first-use policy. This observation raises a subsidiary question. Had Israel and the United States made such a declaratory policy, regardless of its believability, would Egypt and Iraq have exhibited beliefs about potential nuclear weapons so as to have adopted different military behaviors?¹ Michael Gerson and Scott Sagan argue that an ambiguous first use policy generates crisis instability precisely because non-nuclear states might have to take (dangerous) precautions to hedge their bets.² In their view, a nuclear no-first-use policy has a rational benefit in addition to strengthening norms regarding nuclear weapon use. One wonders whether Avey's argument validates the policy recommendations that Gerson and Sagan have suggested.

The third issue is one highlighted by Avey himself towards the end of his article: the role of domestic politics and/or leaders' beliefs. Egypt circa 1973 and Iraq circa 1990 may both be non-democracies with common characteristics. Yet Anwar Sadat did not reshape the Egyptian political regime into a personalistic dictatorship

¹ Of course, this policy would require Israel to have declared that it even has a nuclear arsenal.

² Michael S. Gerson, "No First Use: The Next Step for U.S. Nuclear Policy," *International Security* 35:2 (2010): 7-47; and Scott D. Sagan, "The Case for No First Use," *Survival* 51:3 (2009): 163-182.

like Saddam Hussein did in Iraq. Saddam had heightened threat perceptions that caused him to consider all sorts of dangers—real and imagined—to his rule and safety. He thus might have been predisposed to discount normative constraints on the use of nuclear weapons, especially since he used chemical weapons against Iran and Kurdish populations located in the south. To be sure, Avey shows that Egypt heeded the possibility of Israel nuclear use, but as he wisely acknowledges, the lack of direct evidence in Egyptian decision-making forbids a complete test of the argument. What would be worth examining is whether variation exists even among non-nuclear autocracies in terms of how they assess the probability of nuclear weapons use by their adversaries.

These issues are grounds for further research and they do not detract from the intelligent and compelling analysis that Avey offers. Indeed, a key contribution of Avey's *Security Studies* article is that it permits us to address new questions that we might not have considered before.

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