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# Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts

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This article addresses the role of nuclear taboo or the tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons in limited wars involving a nuclear- and a nonnuclear-weapon state and the importance of this prohibitory norm to deterrence theory. It explores nonnuclear states' strategic calculations before launching wars against nuclear-armed states. It discusses the historical, moral, normative, and rational bases of the taboo and explains why nuclear states have refrained from using their capability vis-à-vis nonnuclear challengers. Two cases of nonnuclear states initiating wars—the 1973 Egyptian offensive against Israel and the 1982 Argentine invasion of the British Falkland Islands—and the calculations of these states' decision makers on their adversaries' nuclear capability are addressed. The article concludes by discussing the implications of nuclear taboo for deterrence theory and regional conflicts, the conditions under which it could be broken, and the likely consequences of its infraction.

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A great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on the deterrent value of nuclear weapons at the systemic level, especially their role or limitations in preserving the long peace between the superpowers (Gaddis 1987; Jervis 1989; Mueller 1989). A neglected area of research has been the role of nuclear weapons in limited wars in regional theaters. Specifically, challengers' perceptions of adversaries' nuclear weapons while initiating wars or limited attacks and the calculations of nuclear-armed defenders have eluded scholarly concern. Since the dawn of the nuclear age, a total of 10 significant wars

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have occurred between nuclear states and nonnuclear adversaries,<sup>1</sup> 5 of which had been initiated by nonnuclear states. Cases of nonnuclear-weapon states initiating wars or military assaults are the Chinese intervention in Korea against the United States and the United Nations in 1950, the Vietnamese offensives against the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Egyptian and Syrian offensives against Israel in 1973, the Argentine invasion of the British Falkland Islands in 1982, and the Iraqi attacks on Israel during the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

The on-the-eve calculations of the initiators and defenders in these wars could shed considerable light on the role and/or limitations of nuclear weapons in preventing limited wars between nuclear- and nonnuclear-weapon states. As George and Smoke (1974, 46) argued, deterrence at the strategic level is better developed than deterrence in limited-war contexts because of the difficulty in isolating the conditions that allow the working of the phenomenon at the substrategic level. Knowledge of the calculations of decision makers in regional settings could shed light on how deterrence works in actual decision-making contexts at different levels of conflict.

Different conceptions of rational deterrence theory assume that nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect at most levels of conflict. According to general deterrence theory, a state should normally be deterred from starting war against a nuclear adversary because there is a possibility for the defender to launch a nuclear attack if its vital interests are severely affected (Morgan 1983, 42-5; Huth and Russett 1993, 61-73). A potential initiator is deterred because of the possibility of suffering severe damage and its inability to limit the damage should an attack take place (Waltz 1995, 34). Thus the intrinsic qualities of nuclear weapons—the immense destructiveness, speed, and the fear that these weapons inspire—should force nations to abandon their aggressive moves when threatened with nuclear destruction (Organski and Kugler 1980, 151). Additionally, the uncertainty about whether nuclear weapons will be introduced in the heat of a conventional battle should prevent military attack against a nuclear-armed state (Waltz 1981, 1990, 1995). The deployment policies of nuclear-weapon states, especially in crisis-prone regions, have been partially motivated by the uncertainties that these weapons

1. These are the Korean War (1950-1953), the Suez Conflict (1956), the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), the Vietnam War (1965-1973), the Middle East War (1973), The Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), the Afghan War (1979-1989), the Falklands War (1982), the Lebanese War (1982), and the Gulf War (1990-1991). The Lebanese and Palestinian militant groups' offensives against Israel since the 1970s, the offensives by Sri Lankan Tamil guerillas as well as the Kashmiri militants against a presumably nuclear-armed India in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Chechen nationalist struggle against Russia in 1994-1995 are major cases of subnational groups openly challenging nuclear-weapon states or undeclared nuclear states.

could engender among the decision makers of the regional states. Apart from general deterrence, extended deterrence theory also assumes that under certain circumstances, a nonnuclear challenger could be deterred through the threat of nuclear retaliation by the defender of the ally under threat (Huth 1990).

Nuclear deterrence theory is purported to allow a state to prevent war as well as obtain its political objectives through the strategy of "leaving something to chance." This strategy attempts to solve the credibility problem involved in nuclear retaliation by assuming that states do not have complete collective control of events (Powell 1990, 110; Schelling 1980, 187-203). Both deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment also assume capabilities as the significant component in preventing war initiations by challengers. Under the former, deterrence can be achieved if the defender has the "capability to deny the other party any gains deriving from the move which is to be deterred." In the latter, deterrence is achieved by "posing the prospects of war costs greater than the value of the gain" (Snyder 1961, 15-6; see also Snyder 1960).

Despite these notions about its robustness, many past studies on deterrence and extended deterrence question the role of nuclear weapons in conflicts involving nuclear and nonnuclear states. For instance, Organski and Kugler (1980, 158-61) argued that the claim of deterrence theory—that when confronted with nuclear terror, leaders become more frightened and terrified and, thereby, more cautious—has not been proven. Indeed, the fear of nuclear weapons is more manifest among their possessors, indicating the operation of self-deterrence. Their case studies point out that nuclear-weapon states have been targets of extraordinarily provocative attacks and, in some cases, have been defeated by nonnuclear powers (Organski and Kugler 1980, 176).

Similarly, in a study that examined 393 international confrontations that occurred between 1946 and 1976, Geller (1990) found that the possession of nuclear weapons by defenders appears to have no deterrent effect in disputes with nonnuclear states. He concluded that nuclear disputes are more likely to escalate (short of war) than nonnuclear disputes; but in conflicts between nuclear and nonnuclear states, the possession of nuclear weapons has no apparent inhibitory effect on the escalatory behavior of the opponent (p. 307). A key study by Huth and Russett (1988) on extended deterrence theory also concluded that the role of nuclear weapons is commonly overrated (p. 38). In a majority of cases analyzed in this study, the disproportionate destructive capacity of nuclear weapons inhibited their actual use. Huth and Russett contended that a normative restraint on nuclear threats against nonnuclear states has emerged that views nuclear weapons as overkill (p. 38).

Yet the role of nuclear weapons in the strategic calculations of nonnuclear states that start wars against nuclear-weapon states is unclear. The following are some pertinent questions:

1. Why do nuclear weapons many times fail to produce the outcomes that are supposed to follow from them?
2. Are nuclear weapons a class apart and meant only for deterring wars between major powers at the strategic level?
3. What role do they play in limited wars involving a nuclear-armed and a nonnuclear-weapon state?
4. If nuclear weapons are irrelevant in wars between nuclear and nonnuclear states, what accounts for this phenomenon?
5. Why does a nonnuclear state initiate military action against a nuclear-armed adversary, even when the possibility for a nuclear response exists?

In this article, a normative explanation is provided for the apparent boldness of the nonnuclear state in initiating wars against nuclear adversaries. It centers on the prohibitory norm of nuclear taboo that all nuclear states have thus far observed. The argument here is that one of the key calculations, albeit an important one, of the nonnuclear state springs from the taboo, which is an unwritten international prohibition since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks that nuclear weapons should not be used, especially against nonnuclear states. Nonnuclear initiators thus believe that the nuclear defender is self-deterred through the operation of the taboo in addition to other possible restraints. The presence of the taboo can be inferred from the fact that there exists no international law or treaty that explicitly bans the use of nuclear weapons, and yet nuclear states have refrained from making use of their advantage in armed confrontations *vis-à-vis* nonnuclear states, even when some such attacks would have made military sense. In addition, nonnuclear initiators did not possess nuclear capability so as to deter a potential nuclear retaliatory strike by their adversaries. If neither an explicit legal ban nor a deterrent capability to prevent possible nuclear retaliation does exist, what else could explain the belief among decision makers of nonnuclear states that nuclear weapons will not be used against them?

Arguably, to understand the dynamics of this type of conflict, one needs to look at the larger strategic and political assessments of the initiator and the role that nuclear weapons may play within these calculations. In many conflicts of this nature, the strategic calculations of the nonnuclear nations initiating war have been that the war would remain limited and that the nuclear state would not use all its capability, including nuclear weapons, in retaliation and thereby expand the conflict. Often, the initiators in these wars

fight for limited territorial, political, or diplomatic goals, and, therefore, conceding ground on such issues is not equivalent to decisive defeats for the nuclear state. If the initiator is weaker in the overall capability dimension, the stronger nuclear state may not take its threat as seriously as it would with an equal or stronger opponent. Therefore, it may not commit all its capability to defend against the attacker (Paul 1994, 28).

A nonnuclear initiator could believe that its total obliteration by the nuclear state is unlikely to happen, especially in a war in which combatants fight for limited stakes. The restraints on the nuclear-weapon state in this respect may be due to considerations of expediency and usefulness, operating procedures of military organizations, technological constraints, third party pressures, or moral cognizance. Likely domestic political opposition to using unlimited force may also be a reason for the anticipated restraint. Nuclear states that are party to an alliance may be constrained by the alliance partner's wishes against the use of nuclear weapons. Third party intervention, especially by the superpowers in preventing the opponent from unleashing its nuclear capability, can be a major consideration. Tactical and strategic difficulties could forbid a nuclear-weapon state from introducing nuclear weapons into the theater. Additionally, the objective of many limited wars cannot be achieved with nuclear weapons. The battlefield implications, especially for the morale of one's own troops, are high as well. All these are powerful reassurances to a nonnuclear state considering war involvement with a nuclear-weapon state, and some of these factors could come into play in the overall strategic assessment of a potential war initiator depending on the specific circumstances. Apart from these considerations, a nonnuclear state could calculate that the nuclear state would be reluctant to use nuclear weapons, as it would be breaking the taboo against nuclear use.

The following are key questions that decision makers of a nonnuclear initiator could confront: what would prevent the nuclear state from using its nuclear weapons to obtain tactical and strategic objectives? Under what conditions could the war remain limited and nonnuclear? I contend in this article that the initiator's calculations in this respect hinge to a great extent on the prohibitory norm based on nuclear taboo, and, thereby, the unlikelihood of nuclear use in battle. I first discuss the concept of taboo and its application to the nuclear realm. In the second section, I examine two case studies—the Egyptian offensive against Israel in 1973 and the Argentine invasion of the British Falkland Islands. I then explore how normative considerations affect deterrence outcomes, especially the expectations of the challenger state with respect to the credibility and commitment of the defender's retaliatory threat. I conclude by arguing that in limited wars involving a nuclear and a nonnuclear state, normative factors could play a

significant role in the cost-benefit calculations of initiators and defenders. I also argue that along with domestic political and psychological variables, normative factors can constrain a defender's deterrent threat and a challenger's expected utility regarding the costs of war.

## THE NUCLEAR TABOO

The term *taboo* is derived from the Polynesian word *tabu* (prohibition). In its sociological aspects, it refers to "a system of prohibitions observed as customs" (Webster 1942, 13). A taboo arises from the fear of something "mystically dangerous" (p. 14), and generally, its authority is based on custom rather than any positive legal, moral, or religious codes. As Webster (1942, 17) stated: "The authority of a taboo is unmatched by that of any other prohibition. There is no reflection on it, no reasoning about it, no discussion of it. A taboo amounts simply to an imperative thou-shalt-not in the presence of the danger apprehended." Taboo denotes the prohibitions arising from the mysterious attributes of a person, thing, or a place, or a transitory condition. As Freud (1950, 22) characterized, it connotes attributes such as "sacred," "above the ordinary," "dangerous," "unclean," and "uncanny." Assumptions of danger and fear of repercussions of the particular act committed characterize most social taboos. For some taboos, the anticipated repercussions could be in the form of disease or death to the violator and the violator's associates.

These stringent definitions of social taboos may not be fully applicable in the nuclear context. However, the tradition of nonuse has been characterized by many scholars as equivalent to a taboo (e.g., Hoffmann 1966, 99; Schelling 1980, 260). In this context, the term *taboo* is used in its figurative and loose sense—as an unwritten and uncodified prohibitory norm against nuclear use. It is also used to the extent that both social and nuclear taboos are based on the fear of consequences of a given course of action. The latter arose as a response to a realization of the danger or the unforeseeable consequences involved in nuclear war. The analysis in this article elaborates on the moral, normative, legal, and rational constraints involved in the use of nuclear weapons and their possible role in the formation and evolution of the taboo.<sup>2</sup>

2. A somewhat similar taboo exists in the area of chemical weapons. Most explanations of the nonuse of chemical weapons by belligerents during World War II, despite possessing huge arsenals, give the taboo a significant place (Price 1995, 73-103; Legro 1995). The other cited reasons are retaliatory threats by both sides, a general feeling of abhorrence by governments and public alike, and the unpreparedness of military organizations (Price 1995, 74).

U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles initially used the term *taboo* to describe the prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons. On October 7, 1953, he was reported to have said: "Somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons" (quoted in Bundy 1988, 249). Dulles was in favor of developing usable nuclear weapons to obtain the battlefield military objectives of the United States. Schelling popularized the concept of a tradition of nonuse in his writings in the 1960s. In his words, what makes atomic weapons different is a powerful tradition for their nonuse, "a jointly recognized expectation that they may not be used in spite of declarations of readiness to use them, even in spite of tactical advantages in their use" (Schelling 1980, 260). A tradition in this respect is based on a habit or disposition that prevents the use of nuclear weapons as a serious option for consideration by decision makers.<sup>3</sup> As Schelling (1994, 110) argued, the main reason for the uniqueness of nuclear weapons is the perception that they are unique and that once introduced into combat, they could not be "contained, restrained, confined, or limited." Although prolonged conventional war can also cause somewhat similar levels of destruction, the difference is in the perception of the impact. The swiftness with which destruction can take place is the distinguishing point in this respect.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the nuclear taboo has developed largely as a function of the awesome destructive power of atomic weapons. The potential for total destruction gives nuclear weapons an all-or-nothing characteristic unlike any other weapon invented so far, which, in turn, makes it imperative that the possessor will not use them against another state except as a last-resort weapon. This means a nuclear state may not use its ultimate capability unless a threshold is crossed (e.g., unless the survival of the state itself is threatened). Decision makers and the public at large in most nuclear-weapon states believe that great danger is involved in the use of nuclear weapons with respect to casualties and aftereffects, in both psychological and physical terms. Breaking the taboo could bring the revulsion of generations to come unless it were for an issue of extremely vital importance—a situation that thus far has failed to materialize. Not surprisingly, nuclear states, even when they could have received major tactical and strategic gains by using nuclear weapons, have desisted from their use.

3. As Lee (1993, 320, 324) argued, the disposition that would make the use of nuclear weapons unthinkable for decision makers is that either the thought of using them would never occur to them or, should it occur, "the abhorrence at the thought would be such that the idea of using them would be immediately dismissed without reaching the point of being considered a real alternative." The tradition of nonuse thus involves a strong normative proscription.

4. An analogy of traffic accidents may serve to explain this point. In a large city, the daily death rate because of motor vehicle accidents could be 50 persons or so. However, these individual accidents rarely get the attention and have psychological impact that a single accident would if it involved the death of 50 or even 25 persons altogether.

The taboo has been observed by all nuclear and opaque-nuclear states thus far. Nations with different ideological and political systems and military traditions—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, and Israel—have found no occasion to use them, pointing toward the emergence of a global “recognition that nuclear weapons are unusable across much of the range of traditional military and political interests” (Russett 1989, 185). The American unwillingness to use them in Korea and Vietnam to obtain military victory and the Soviet refrain from using them to avert defeat in Afghanistan suggest the entrenchment of the taboo among the superpowers even during the peak of the cold war period.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese aversion to using them against the Vietnamese to obtain victory in the 1979 war also point out that other nuclear powers have observed the taboo.

In the United States, the taboo or the tradition of nonuse became well entrenched despite many urgings by military and political leaders to break it during times of intense crises. It was observed in the 1950s and 1960s when the United States could have gained major tactical and strategic objectives against its adversaries. Possibly, it began with the revulsion and the fear that the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks engendered in the consciousness of the public and political leadership. Although the fear of nuclear weapons had been somewhat removed by the end of the 1940s, with the Soviet attainment of nuclear and missile capability in the early 1960s, a sense of renewed vulnerability began to creep into the American public perception (Malcolmson 1990, 8, 35; Weart 1988). This sense of vulnerability, arising from the awareness that effective defenses against a nuclear attack do not exist, may have contributed to the development of the nuclear taboo. The Vietnam War saw the entrenchment of the tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons. In 1969, President Nixon “could not make the nuclear threat in Vietnam that he believed he had seen Eisenhower use successfully in Korea” (Bundy 1988, 587-8). Since then, each passing decade saw the strengthening of this tradition, and the experience of over four decades “has more firmly established a *de facto* norm of non-use” (Russett 1989, 185). The Cuban missile crisis further showed the perils of a crisis spilling over to a possible nuclear war. The crisis underlined the dangers of atomic posturing to the point of permanently discrediting this kind of atomic diplomacy (Bundy 1984, 50).<sup>6</sup>

5. The prospects of spillover effects into the U.S.-Soviet central strategic balance might have been a key factor in their restraint. Also, the use of nuclear weapons would have adversely affected their efforts to obtain the allegiance of smaller states. However, it could be argued that the failures in Vietnam and Afghanistan did affect the American and Soviet credibility as superpowers. The military and political setbacks were accompanied by the installation of regimes staunchly opposed to Washington and Moscow.

6. Despite this experience, the war-fighting doctrines of both the United States and the U.S.S.R. contained possibilities and circumstances under which they would launch nuclear attacks on each other. Regarding the U.S. nuclear doctrine, see Cimbala (1994) and Sagan (1993).

The taboo was also likely to have been strengthened by a rational calculation that military victory following a nuclear attack may not be materially, politically, or psychologically worth obtaining if it involves the destruction of all or a sizable segment of an enemy's population and results in the contamination of a large portion of the territory with radio-active debris. Thus the tradition must have emerged largely from the realization by nuclear states that there are severe limits to what a state can accomplish by actually using a nuclear weapon (Gaddis 1992, 21). It also implies that after a certain point, the capacity to destroy may not be useful, as the relation between the power to harm and the power to modify the behavior of others is not linear (Jervis 1984, 23). Additionally, the effects of nuclear attack may be beyond the local area of attack but could have wider effects, spatially and temporally (Lee 1993, 18). There exists no guarantee that aftereffects such as the spread of radioactive debris could be confined to the target state's territory. Neighboring states that may be neutral or aligned with the nuclear state could be the victims of a nuclear attack as well. The fear that, once unleashed, nuclear terror could escape meaningful political and military control and physical limitation may have influenced decision makers' choices in this regard.

The taboo could have been enhanced by the moral revulsion against the use of nuclear weapons. Peace groups have long argued that any nuclear attack would be morally questionable, as the cost of their use would be catastrophic and disproportionate to the value of any objective sought (Osgood 1988, 97). The possible aftereffects generate fears among decision makers that if they break the taboo, they could become political pariahs at home and abroad and that their use of nuclear weapons could establish wrong precedents for others to follow. The normative and moral factors could have been mixed with the fear of consequences in generating the nuclear taboo (Herring 1992, 8). The innocent victims of a nuclear attack and the possibility of aftereffects for generations could make the leader who casually ordered a nuclear attack a permanent dark figure in history books.

The moral and normative bases of the taboo could have been derived from just-war principles. The moral reasoning against nuclear use has been that its effects are less controllable than conventional warfare, although the latter need not be less destructive. Nuclear pacifists argue that using nuclear weapons could result in a "holocaust of unimaginable fury and horrifying impact" (Johnson 1984, 8) and that the aftereffects would clearly violate all key just-war principles, however limited the attack might be. These principles include discrimination or observing noncombatant immunity, proportionality, and reasonable chance of success. The first forbids the use of nuclear weapons against civilian targets; the second restricts retaliatory action proportionate to the harm done by an opponent; and, according to the third, for

a military action to take place, there should exist a reasonable chance of victory without incurring a high price (Russett 1984, 36-54). Because even a limited nuclear attack does not guarantee that these principles will not be violated, nuclear use becomes highly questionable, even though the adversary has launched a conventional attack.

Some international legal scholars also contend that the use of nuclear weapons is forbidden by international law. Although analysts differ on this issue, Boyle (1986, 1408) argued that nuclear use is illegitimate under Article V of the U.N. charter, which prohibits the use of force except for legitimate self-defense. According to Boyle, the use of nuclear weapons would grossly violate the international laws of humanitarian armed conflict and the Nuremberg principles that proscribe crimes against humanity. Similarly, Weston (1983) concluded that the humanitarian components of laws of war do apply to nuclear weapons and that virtually all potential uses of nuclear weapons violate international law. The pertinent sources of law in this respect are the implicit treaty provisions, international customs, general principles, judicial decisions, UN declarations, and initiatives by international groups such as the Red Cross (Weston 1983, 542).

The evolution of the taboo has been helped by the no-first-use pledges and the nuclear-nonproliferation regime itself. Two nuclear-weapon states—ex-Soviet Union and China—have unilaterally declared no-first-use policies, the former in 1982 and the latter immediately after its first nuclear explosion in 1964. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France have made conditional no-first-use pledges to the effect that they would not use nuclear weapons against a state party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) or any comparable binding international agreement except in the case of a nonnuclear state launching an attack on these states or their allies carried out in alliance with a nuclear-weapon state (Blackaby, Goldblat, and Lodgaard 1984, 321-2).<sup>7</sup> The regime's key pillar, the NPT, contains implicit promises that a nonnuclear state party to the treaty will not be targeted or attacked with nuclear weapons. Article VI of the treaty also calls on nuclear-weapon states to pursue disarmament in earnest, with the purpose of eventually eliminating atomic weapons. During the April 1995 UN conference, which extended the treaty indefinitely, these commitments were reiterated by the nuclear-weapon states.<sup>8</sup>

7. Russia in recent times has backed out of its no-first-use pledge, mainly for domestic political reasons.

8. In a document entitled "Statement of Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament," the five nuclear-weapon states pledged to make "systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally, with the ultimate goal of eliminating those weapons" (*The New York Times* 1995). Critics, however, argue that these declarations are not binding and, therefore, could be violated if necessary.

## CASE STUDIES

This section explores how the nuclear taboo has affected limited wars in regional theaters. Specifically, I examine two cases of war initiation by nonnuclear states against nuclear-armed adversaries. In one of the cases, the 1973 Middle East War, the defender had included nuclear retaliation in its deterrent strategy toward the Arab opponents. In the Falklands case, immediate deterrence was not the key element of British strategy. However, it is assumed that the superior nuclear and conventional capability that Britain possessed would have had a general deterrent effect, because there existed a possibility for the defender to use such capabilities against the nonnuclear challenger in a worst-case contingency. The strategic and political calculations of the decision makers of these states, especially with respect to their adversaries' possession and likely retaliatory use of nuclear weapons, form the main focus of the case studies.

### CASE 1: THE 1973 MIDDLE EAST WAR

The October 1973 Middle East War was initiated by two nonnuclear states—Egypt and Syria—against Israel, an undeclared nuclear-weapon state. According to one account, Israel had begun nuclear arms production at the Dimona facility in the Negev desert in 1968, and by 1973, it possessed 20 to 25 nuclear weapons. In addition, Israel reportedly held three or more operational missile launchers at Hirtbat Zachariah, several Jericho I mobile missile launchers that were capable of hitting all major Arab capitals, and a squadron of nuclear-capable F-4 fighter aircraft on full alert. Israel was also believed to have retained low-yield tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield purposes on artillery that were capable of striking targets at a 25- to 45-mile distance (Hersh 1991, 215-6). The Israeli leadership had implicitly declared this capability as the ultimate deterrent against an Arab attack. Prior to the war, leaders such as Moshe Dayan had hinted at the Israeli nuclear deterrent and made ambiguous nuclear threats (Evron 1990; Pry 1984; Bar-Joseph 1982; Feldman 1982; Freedman 1975).

By 1973, the Israeli deterrent calculations were based on the possession of superior conventional and nuclear capability. The leadership believed that because Egypt did not hold sufficient conventional capability to launch a successful attack on Israeli airfields and could not match the Israeli preponderance in tanks and armored vehicles, it would be deterred from launching an offensive (Handel 1976, 49-50; Brecher 1980, 53-4). Defense Minister Dayan believed that the Arab states would not initiate a war before the early 1980s, and until then, the Israeli nuclear capability was likely to act as a

deterrent against their conventional attack. The Arabs would need at least 10 years to produce their own bomb to neutralize the Israeli nuclear capability. Without explicit Soviet cooperation, Egypt would not be in a position to neutralize the Israeli nuclear capability. The Israeli leaders assumed that President Sadat's expulsion of Soviet advisers in 1972 would have further reduced the credibility of any nuclear guarantee that the U.S.S.R. might have given to Egypt (Aronson 1978, 164-5, 1984, 107-42). According to one account, Dayan believed that the Israeli capability to hit targets in the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons could also deter Moscow from supporting an Arab offensive, thereby removing a necessary precondition for military action (Hersh 1991, 220-1).

The Egyptian leaders, especially Gamal Nasser and Anwar Sadat, were well aware of the Israeli efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Some suggest that the 1967 Egyptian mobilization was partly motivated by a desire to engage in a preventive war against the Israeli nuclear capability. From 1967 to 1973, the Arab leaders and the media talked continuously of the Israeli nuclear capability and its implications (Van Creveld 1993, 108-10; Evron 1973, 19-31). The Egyptians were also presumed to have received intelligence information on the Israeli nuclear weapons and strategy from the Soviet spies who had penetrated the Israeli defense and intelligence establishments (Hersh 1991, 219).

The limited available accounts suggest that prior to launching the war in 1973, the Egyptian leadership's strategic assessment did take into account the Israeli nuclear capability. To President Sadat and his advisors, a limited attack confined to the occupied Sinai would preclude the use of nuclear weapons by Israel. They believed that Israel would not use weapons of mass destruction to protect the Sinai, a territory that was not equivalent to the pre-1967 border of Israel itself. Unless the population in Tel Aviv was attacked and the Israeli heartland was in grave danger, the Egyptian leadership calculated that there was little chance that Israel would unleash its nuclear weapons (Al-Gamasi 1990; Basheer 1990).

Thus the Egyptian leadership calculated that a possible Israeli nuclear use could be prevented if they engaged in a limited war for limited military and political objectives. General Shazly, the Egyptian chief of staff in 1973, pointed out that the military leadership adopted a limited-aims strategy because they realized that it was impossible for Egypt to "launch a large-scale offensive to destroy the enemy concentrations in Sinai or to force the enemy withdrawal from Sinai and the Gaza strip. All that our capabilities would permit was a limited attack. We could aim to cross the Canal, destroy the Bar-Lev line and then take up a defensive posture" (Shazly 1980, 24-5). The Egyptian leadership conceived war as a means to attract superpower attention

to the stalemated dispute. Specifically, it was anticipated that a surprise attack, confined to an area of 20 miles on both sides of the Suez Canal, and a war fought for 3 weeks would attract U.S.-Soviet attention to the ongoing conflict. The superpower intervention, especially U.S. pressure, would force Israel to come to the negotiating table. The prior contacts by President Sadat with the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger suggest that he wanted to convey to the United States, and through them to Israel, his limited war intentions and thereby restrain Israel from nuclear retaliation (Aronson 1992, 145).

In the early 1970s, the Egyptian leadership debated the issue of nuclear weapons and the need for Soviet nuclear arms to resist the Israeli threat. One group consisting of Ali Sabri, Muhammed Heikal, General Sadek, and Ismail Fahmi demanded either the positioning of Soviet nuclear arms and delivery systems in Egypt or at least Soviet guarantees against possible future Israeli threats. Sadat feared political consequences in such a move. The Soviet rejection of the demand made it easier for Sadat to ignore the opposition to his policy on the Israeli nuclear capability (Bar-Joseph 1982, 207).

Although the Israeli nuclear capability figured in the Egyptian calculations, the strategy that the leadership adopted—limited-aims/*fait-accompli*—was expected to circumvent that capability. Nuclear weapons were not viewed as deterring a limited conventional war. The taboo against using nuclear weapons for anything other than a mortal danger to the existence of a state, in this case, Israel, gave sufficient assurances to the Egyptians that these weapons would not be used on the battlefield for the protection of the occupied Sinai, which Israel was ready to trade off for the correct diplomatic and political price. They also calculated that the anticipated superpower intervention, especially that of the United States, would act as an additional restraint on Israel from escalating the conflict to the nuclear level.

#### **CASE 2: THE 1982 FALKLANDS WAR**

The invasion and occupation of the Falkland Islands by Argentina, a nonnuclear state, and its determination to wage a war against Britain, a nuclear-weapon state, to maintain its control over the islands show the relevance and application of nuclear taboo in regional conflicts. It can be argued that the British strategy toward Argentina prior to the war did not offer a credible immediate deterrent threat based on conventional or nuclear capability. The Argentine military junta was not given a convincing warning about the seriousness of the British intent to protect the islands militarily: “No strongly worded warnings, even private ones, emanated from London

until 31 March, when the invasion was all but a fait accompli" (Lebow 1985, 110). Despite the lack of warning, the Argentine leadership should have pondered the British conventional and nuclear capability and its potential to inflict serious damage on Argentina's major population and industrial centers.

The British nuclear capability included two aircraft carriers—HMS *Invincible* and *Hermes*—with tactical nuclear weapons such as WE 177 free-fall and depth bombs on board. The delivery systems comprised aircraft such as *Buccaneer* and *Sea Harrier* and helicopters such as *Sea King* and *Lynx*. The Royal Air Force also possessed tactical aircraft such as *Vulcan*, *Jaguar*, *Buccaneer*, and *Tornado* that carried nuclear weapons. Of the British destroyers and frigates, 40 were capable of bearing depth bombs for helicopter delivery (Rogers 1994). The nuclear force also included 100 Polaris missiles that could have been fired on Argentine targets from an appropriate distance in the Atlantic (Norris, Burrows, and Fieldhouse 1994, 64-5).

The British apparently brought in some of these nuclear arms to the theater during the war. Some reports suggested that the naval ship HMS *Sheffield* carried nuclear weapons and that a few nuclear depth charges were available for use against Argentina if necessary. According to one report, the *Sheffield* sank together with its nuclear weapons (*Latin American Weekly Report* 1982). The *Sea King* helicopters on the aircraft carriers reportedly possessed depth charges, whereas the *Harrier* jump jets carried free-fall bombs (*The Times* [London] 1982). There were also reports of Britain sending a Polaris nuclear submarine to the South Atlantic following the sinking of the HMS *Sheffield*. The submarine was reportedly sent to the South Atlantic with the instruction to be battle-ready (*The New Statesman* 1984, 8). It has yet to be determined whether these dispatches were purposive or inadvertent.<sup>9</sup>

The Argentine calculations prior to the war rested on the premise that Britain would not use nuclear weapons to protect a far-away island group with little direct economic or strategic value. Moreover, the Argentine action did not directly challenge the survival of the British islands themselves in any sense (Alford 1984). The Argentine military and political assumptions were based on a limited-aims strategy under which the Argentine forces would occupy the islands and pursue negotiations thereafter to gain sovereignty over the disputed territories. The main objective of the April 2, 1982, invasion was to create a politico-military fait accompli that Britain would not be able to alter without incurring major political and economic costs. "Oc-

9. Quester (1986, 123) argued that they were probably not the result of a deliberate British policy but a consequence of standard operating procedures for the Navy and that the shortage of time prevented their off-loading.

copy to negotiate” was the key objective of the invasion (*Infrome Rattenbach* 1988, 190).<sup>10</sup>

The calculations of the Argentine leaders were based on an expectation that Britain would not respond militarily to their action, and even if it did, they could still wage a limited war. Before the Argentine junta ordered the invasion, Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Mendez sought opinion from the Argentine missions in London and New York regarding the likely response from Britain, and he received the advice that the Thatcher government would most likely sever diplomatic relations and impose trade and economic sanctions but would refrain from military counteractions (Gavson and Rice 1984, 21). The drastic reduction of the Royal Naval Fleet in the Atlantic—especially the decision to remove HMS *Endurance* from South Atlantic waters—and the previous decision to evacuate the British Antarctic mission from South Georgia confirmed the junta’s expectation that the British would not “deploy major forces to protect the islands” (Costa Mendez 1987). Argentine strategists calculated that with surprise and a favorable local balance, they could resist a British counterattack, and a force of 5,000 men in defensive positions could protect the islands against an attack by a British force three times larger (Calvert 1982, 86).

The crucial question for this article is the Argentine assessment of Britain’s nuclear capability and the likelihood of nuclear use. The possibility existed because if Britain incurred major losses in the war and still could not dislodge the Argentines, the Thatcher government would have been under tremendous pressure to use all available capability to achieve Britain’s strategic and battlefield objectives. The junta considered and then discounted the chances of Britain using its nuclear forces in the event of its losing the conventional battle. It was viewed as highly improbable, because Britain would incur the world’s wrath by breaking the nuclear taboo. Additionally, the United States and the U.S.S.R. would have prevented it if the British threatened to use nuclear weapons in a small conventional theater like the South Atlantic (Busser and Enciso 1990).

Although the initiator in this case did not directly attack the defender’s home territory, the British nuclear capability was a factor that the military junta seems to have considered before launching their invasion. The Argentine leadership believed that the British would not respond militarily, with either conventional or nuclear weapons. Even when the British task force, with reports of nuclear weapons aboard its ships, began sail to liberate the islands, the Argentines were convinced that the formidable conventional and

10. Military action was also conceived as a means to “maintain the international credibility” of Argentina’s claims over the Islands and to avoid a “definitive freezing” of a decade-long negotiation (Costa Mendez 1987, 119-22).

nuclear capability would not be used to liberate the islands or to attack the Argentine mainland. Nuclear retaliation by Britain was discounted, and nuclear taboo did play a major role in that calculation.

## IMPLICATIONS

The prohibitory taboo against using nuclear weapons and the belief among the decision makers of challenger states of its prevalence, as shown in the case studies, have significant implications for deterrence theory and policy. The credibility of a deterrent threat relies on two necessary conditions: the political will to respond militarily and the possession of sufficient capability to mount the retaliatory threat (Harknett 1994, 89). The taboo clearly raises questions about the political commitment and credibility necessary for successful deterrence. These cases point to the difficulty in translating nuclear capability into credible deterrent threat and the constraints in committing one's capability for anything other than the supreme interests of a state. The credibility of declared or tacit commitment is questioned when a nonnuclear state initiates a war, even when the adversary possesses weapons of mass destruction. The credibility problem is not confined to situations of mutual assured destruction but also applies to asymmetric conflicts involving nuclear and nonnuclear states. Similarly, the credibility of extended deterrence could be affected by the tradition of nonuse, as a nonnuclear challenger's attack on an ally need not threaten the vital interests of the nuclear defender as much as would a direct attack on it to warrant nuclear response.

Rational deterrence theory assumes that a challenger goes to war when it expects that the defender's capability and credibility of threat are not sufficiently strong. This article points out that one of the conditions that affect the credibility of retaliatory threat is the prohibitory norm against nuclear use. In other words, a challenger's calculations may include intangible factors such as normative restraints against using nuclear weapons. Cost-benefit calculations based on military balance alone would not sufficiently predict a challenger's motives or incentives to launch an attack. Deterrence theory should specify not only capability, commitment, and credibility in the abstract but also the key factors that could affect them. Moreover, a nuclear-armed defender could face major hurdles in translating nuclear capability into an effective deterrent in limited-war situations. These constraints are not simply the result of military considerations but of normative concerns such as the fear of breaking the prohibitory norm against nuclear use. Clearly, along with psychological and domestic variables, normative factors have a place in outcomes of deterrence failures as well as war initiations.

These two case studies show that the mere possession of nuclear weapons need not deter a nonnuclear state from launching a conventional attack against the nuclear-armed state if the initiator believes that it can wage a limited war without provoking a nuclear response.<sup>11</sup> Nuclear deterrence may be effective in circumstances in which the nuclear-weapon state's existence is at stake. However, such challenges are very rare in contemporary international politics, largely because of the legal and institutional norms against conquering another state. Additionally, all declared nuclear states and most undeclared ones are superior to their actual and potential challengers in conventional capability. It thus reinforces the findings of aggregate studies that question the usefulness of nuclear weapons in conflicts involving nuclear and nonnuclear states (Huth and Russett 1988; Geller 1990).

A natural question would be, Why, then, does deterrence hold between two nuclear-armed adversaries? The uncertainty regarding nuclear use seems high in such conflict situations because parties cannot completely rule out the possibility of escalation into a nuclear exchange. The fear of nuclear preemption by either side would put pressure on the decision makers not to allow the crisis to escalate into war. However, in the case of a war between a known nonnuclear state and a nuclear adversary, nuclear preemption is unlikely to occur, unless the defender anticipates a massive conventional attack. The taboo clearly goes into the initiator's calculations regarding the controllability of the opponent's military response to his actions.

However, exaggerated notions about the tradition of nonuse could result in military catastrophes. A nuclear-armed state could be tempted or put under pressure to retaliate with nuclear weapons if it fears losing the war. The reported decisions by the Israeli leaders to place their nuclear forces on alert during the 1973 Middle East War and the 1991 Persian Gulf War suggest the dangers of conventional conflicts escalating to the nuclear level. A second danger would be the pressures on nuclear allies of regional states to intervene in the protection of their client states. The superpower nuclear alert during the 1973 war is a case in point.<sup>12</sup>

11. The Persian Gulf War also showed the limited operation of the taboo. The Iraqi attack on Israel, even when Israel had threatened nuclear retaliation, suggests that the Iraqi leadership was fairly confident that Israel would not use nuclear weapons. The United States could not have credibly deterred Saddam Hussein with threats of nuclear attack because of the disproportionate nature of such a response (Krass 1994, 94). There is also no compelling evidence that the possibility of nuclear attack was seriously considered by the Bush administration (Krass 1994, 45), although there were reports of the likelihood of nuclear retaliation in response to a massive Iraqi use of chemical or biological weapons against allied forces. On the constraints that the Israeli leadership experienced in retaliating Iraq with nuclear weapons, see Freedman and Karsh (1993, chap. 24).

12. For this incident, see Blechman and Hart (1982, 132-56) and Lebow and Stein (1994, chaps. 7-11.)

The taboo has other consequences as well. It could generate incentives on rival states to engage in low-level military activities. It could assure leaders that small-scale harassment would not result in any major retaliatory strikes, especially of a nuclear nature. The continued Pakistani activities in the Indian state of Kashmir and the raids by Islamic groups within Israel suggest this emerging phenomenon in regional conflict zones.

The case studies show the limitations of nuclear weapons as a usable source of power largely because of the difficulty in converting the putative capability into actualized power. In the traditional sense, military power involved the ability of states to affect the will and behavior of other states by threatening or employing armed coercion (Osgood and Tucker 1967, 3). Before the advent of nuclear revolution, a state could obtain its political objectives through the use of punitive and defensive capabilities (Powell 1990, 174). Nuclear weapons brought in a qualitative change in warfare because of their limitations as punitive and defensive weapons. The utility of nuclear weapons is mostly confined to their mutual deterrent effect in terms of preventing the outbreak of large-scale wars; their suitability for deterring small-scale or limited wars seems questionable.<sup>13</sup> Nuclear weapons, instead of providing effective deterrent against an adversary's attack, could self-deter a nuclear state from using its capability against a nonnuclear state. The taboo also suggests that ethical and normative considerations do play a role in national calculations with respect to weapons of mass destruction. Instrumental factors may explain some such choices, but normative considerations may form part of the total strategic and political calculations of nuclear-weapon states and their challengers.

The existence of a taboo does not imply that its infraction is improbable. Transgressions of other social taboos, such as the one against incest, do occur even in tradition-bound societies. Similarly, the taboo against the use of chemical and biological weapons has been broken by some states. However, it could be argued that the nuclear taboo is stronger than the prohibitory norm attached to the use of chemical and biological weapons mainly because of the larger consequences involved in the act and the meager number of states in possession of nuclear weapons globally. It is likely that the further embedding of the nuclear taboo could dramatically depreciate the perceived value of the possession of nuclear weapons. However, an infraction of the taboo without adverse consequences to the transgressor could undermine its basis. From the point of view of a nuclear-weapon state, breaking the taboo may bring short-term benefits if the use of nuclear weapons can force the

13. The appreciation of the difficulties in using nuclear weapons as battlefield weaponry seems to have prompted the U.S. and the Soviet decisions to remove many tactical nuclear weapons worldwide.

nonnuclear state to abandon its strategic and political objectives. In the long run, this will give powerful ammunition to other nuclear states to use the weapons in similar situations. It could also thwart the efforts to stem the tide of nuclear proliferation. Once used and their usefulness perceived, many nonnuclear states that are party to the NPT could develop nuclear weapons, as national capability becomes essential to deter possible future uses against them by other nuclear-weapon states.

Future research could identify the following: (1) the larger implications of the nuclear taboo to deterrence theory and policy, (2) the conditions under which it could be broken, (3) the risks inherent in wars involving a nuclear and nonnuclear state, and (4) its importance in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional countries. The conditions under which it could be infringed upon are of special significance. If the nuclear state's vital interests are crossed (e.g., if the state loses a large portion of its territory), nuclear use is a possibility. Moreover, intrawar pressures tend to be high on decision makers, who might be tempted to use their nuclear capability as a war-terminating device before large-scale destruction of their forces or loss of their territory occurs. Additionally, a state or an armed force not fully socialized into the tradition of nonuse could use its nuclear capability in the opening phase of a war, during a stalemated situation, or when facing military disaster. The further miniaturization of nuclear weapons with precision-guided applications could also provide temptation to break the taboo. Explicit legal and normative international prohibitions supported by threats of collective punishment for transgression by the global community may strengthen the taboo and prolong the continued nonuse of nuclear weapons. Conversion of the tradition to tacit or explicit global understanding is possible if the taboo continues unbroken for a long period of time. Many laws of warfare that exist today have evolved through centuries from traditions and customs.

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