

# Peace by Fear:

## How the Fear of Nuclear Weapons Prevented War in the Twentieth Century

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On 16 July, 1945, The United States (US) had its first successful nuclear bomb test, and less than a month later, the US deployed the first and only two nuclear weapons ever used in history on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The use of these bombs leveled the cities and killed millions, leading the Japanese to surrender out of fear of further destruction, thereby ending World War II. The use of these weapons not only ended the war, but also sent a message to the world regarding the immense power of nuclear weapons. In response, other states began to devote much more effort to develop their own nuclear weapons, with varying degrees of success. Since the creation of the atomic bomb and the end of World War II, despite many people's fears, a nuclear war has not occurred nor have any direct wars occurred between great powers. This has caused the era after World War II to also be known as the "Long Peace," because it is one of the longest times in human history that the powers of the world have gone without directly warring each other. Although war is not a thing of past, the "Long Peace" is a direct result of the existence of nuclear weapons. Initially, the possession of nuclear weapons guaranteed a state's sovereignty through the threat of complete destruction to any state that threatened them. This power incentivized other states to also create nuclear weapons in order to compete and guarantee their own protection; however, due to the now widespread possession of nuclear weapon and the threat of mutual destruction, states chose de-escalation of conflict rather than risking a nuclear attack, thereby deterring aggression and preventing wars.

The US monopoly on nuclear weapons greatly threatened the Soviet's existence and as a result, led Soviets to develop their own nuclear weapons. Due to the states' drastically different ideologies and their status after World War II as the only two great powers left in the world, it was expected that these two states would become rivals. According to the US National Security

Council in 1950, the Soviet Union's ultimate goal was to "retain and solidify their absolute power" over their half of the world, but the United States stood as the "bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion" and therefore must be eliminated.<sup>1</sup> As each other's nemesis, it fell on the Soviets to develop a nuclear weapon or face the atomic wrath of the US. The Soviets then conducted their first atomic bomb test in 1949, ending the US's nuclear monopoly. While this caused many to panic over the threat of a coming nuclear war between the two states, this acquisition actually greatly reduced the likelihood of any future conflict. Ideally, a state would want to launch a single attack which would destroy the other state's entire nuclear arsenal, preventing the opportunity to retaliate. This was dangerous, since as the United States National Security Council explained, having only two nuclearly armed states who had a severe lack of trust in each other, "puts a premium on a surprise attack," since provoked or not, the idea of disarming the other in one fell swoop was more attractive than being on the receiving end of a nuclear attack.<sup>2</sup> However, should one state fail to disarm the other, a nuclear response would surely follow, resulting in mutually assured destruction. Due to the fear of mutually assured destruction and the extremely low probability of successfully disarming the other in a single attack, neither government was willing to take the risk of provoking the other.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, neither the US nor the Soviet Union would consider war no matter how high tensions were unless the other attacked first.

Much like the Soviet Union, the newly formed Communist Chinese Government pursued nuclear weapons as a means of protecting themselves against the US. In order to prevent

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<sup>1</sup> US National Security Council, "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," (April 14, 1950), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>3</sup> Siracusa, Joseph M. *Nuclear Weapons : A Very Short Introduction. Very Short Introductions.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69.

Communist expansion, the US led the United Nations in the Korean War, an act that the Chinese perceived as a threat due to the proximity to their own border. In 1951 the Chinese sought help from their fellow Communists, the Soviets, to develop nuclear technology as a means of stopping America, should they push this war up the Korean Peninsula and into China to destroy the Communist Government.<sup>4</sup> These fears were rational as well, since General Douglas MacArthur, who led the United Nation forces, had requested nuclear weapons for the purpose of “forward deployment” against the Chinese, although the US government did not accommodate this request over doubts regarding how the Soviets would react and how it would escalate the war.<sup>5</sup> However, the Chinese were warned by the US Secretary of State that if progress towards peace was not rapidly made, the US would deploy nuclear weapons against them. The Chinese took this threat seriously and in response, cooperated in diplomatic talks which resulted in peace within six weeks.<sup>6</sup> After their close call to a war with America and their fear of another war in the Korean Peninsula, China decided that they were not going to take the chance of losing a future war due to lack of nuclear weapons.. Despite losing Soviet support a few years after the Chinese Nuclear Program started due to souring relations, China’s efforts to produce nuclear weapons were finally successful in 1964.<sup>7</sup> As a response to the successful nuclear test, the government of Chinese Taipei, in a panicked worded telegram, requested a military response against the Communist government by the US immediately because of the threat this posed to them.<sup>8</sup> However, the US was not willing to risk a nuclear war with China. Due to China’s new possession of nuclear

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<sup>4</sup> Sagan, Scott D. "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb." *International Security* Vol. 21, no. 3 (1996): 59.

<sup>5</sup> Dingman, Roger. "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War." *International Security* 13, no. 3 (1988): 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>7</sup> Sagan, 60.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Embassy in Taiwan, “Telegram to US State Department,” October 23, 1964. William Burr, *The National Security Archive*, The George Washington University, October 16, 2014.

weapons, the US was now forced to negotiate with the Communist Chinese government as it would be dangerous to ignore them. Despite having recognized the Chinese Nationalist Party as the rightful government of China until this point, support for the Chinese Nationalist Party began to fizzle out until America officially recognized the Communist party as the rightful government of China in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Thus, through the development of nuclear weapons, the Chinese guaranteed that direct conflict with the US would never occur, while also giving their government political legitimacy on a global scale.

States with nuclear weapons were not only guaranteed sovereignty over states that did not possess them, but they also had an advantage in negotiations which could only be countered, in most cases, with more nuclear weapons, inadvertently promoting nuclear proliferation. Similar to “gunboat diplomacy,” “atomic diplomacy” means that states with nuclear weapons could get much more agreeable terms during negotiations since few states were willing to risk war against a nuclear power. While China may have acquired their nuclear weapons as a means of guaranteeing peace with the United States, their weapons also gave them unprecedented leveraging power with their neighbors similar to the leveraging power the weapons gave the US in Korean War negotiations. The most fearful of these neighbors was India, who had just lost a war against China in 1962 over border disputes, that had begun with a surprise attack by the Chinese into the disputed lands.<sup>10</sup> After China developed their first nuclear weapon in 1964, India feared they may take advantage of this new military and diplomatic weapon as a means of restarting the conflict or demanding renegotiation of the previously agreed upon terms to further benefit China. After seeing how the development of nuclear weapons protected China from

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<sup>9</sup> Dingman, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Devereux, David R. "The Sino-Indian War of 1962 in Anglo-American Relations." *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 1 (2009): 71.

America, India followed suit and began production of nuclear weapons which were successful ten years later in 1974.<sup>11</sup> As China's greatest rival in the region, India predicted that the Chinese may exert their dominance again and felt insecure without the guaranteed support of another existing nuclear power to protect them. Thus, India was inclined to develop their own nuclear weapons as a means of protecting their sovereignty. This action had repercussions for Pakistan who had just ended a war with India in 1972 which Pakistan had lost, putting them in a similar position that India had been in with China.<sup>12</sup> Fearful of Indian influence, Pakistan started producing their own nuclear weapons after the successful nuclear test by India and were successful in 1998.<sup>13</sup> In all of these cases, the threat of a hostile nuclear power led previously unarmed states to begin the development of nuclear weapons.

With the widening possession of nuclear weapons among neighbors and rivals, nuclear weapons soon began to play a role in de-escalating conflicts that would have previously resulted in war. In 1969, a border war commenced between China and the Soviets initiated by an unprovoked attack by the Chinese on the Soviet border. Despite starting the conflict, the Chinese stated that they had no intention of "expanding" it knowing that their actions could provoke a nuclear attack.<sup>14</sup> Upon hearing of the Chinese intention to limit the scope of the conflict, the Soviets quickly initiated talks to end it before fighting got out of hand, leading to the conflict being resolved in only a few months.<sup>15</sup> In a similar fashion, in 1999, emboldened by their new weapons, Pakistan led an army into Indian territory causing an international crisis over the threat

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<sup>11</sup> Sagan, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Marwah, Onkar. "India and Pakistan: Nuclear Rivals in South Asia." *International Organization* 35, no. 1 (1981): 165.

<sup>13</sup> Sagan, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Lüthi, Lorenz M. "Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969." *The China Quarterly*, no. 210 (2012): 383.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

of a nuclear war. During this time, both states threatened the other with nuclear attacks and actively readied their nuclear arsenals. However, both states were well aware these were empty threats, since as the Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes described, if Pakistan were to use nuclear weapons, they would “liquidate” their own country in the process.<sup>16</sup> The crisis was quickly solved as once Pakistan lost their land, they accepted their failure, knowing that admitting defeat would cause an internal crisis, but committing to the conflict could lead to nuclear escalation.<sup>17</sup> These conflicts demonstrate how states were fearful to escalate conflicts that could have resulted in nuclear war, thus keeping any conflict between nuclear states limited.

The best way for a state to guarantee their sovereignty is through the possession of nuclear weapons. This incentivized states to pursue the creation of nuclear weapons as a means of protecting themselves from external threats. However, the great power of these weapons is the same reason that states have been so afraid to use them since their usage would likely result in a response of equal or greater magnitude, creating mutual destruction. Nuclear weapons have not ended war as it is, but they have made conflict between the great powers of the world so undesirable for everyone involved that there have been no wars between them since World War II. Any escalation between nuclear powers have been quickly halted by the fear of nuclear war, ensuring that conflicts have never progressed very far. While nuclear weapons were intended to be used as a violent way to guarantee a state’s sovereignty, the mass acquisition of these weapons has de-escalated conflict and prevented wars by uniting enemies through a common fear of the very weapons they possess.

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<sup>16</sup> Marwah, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Tellis, Ashley J., C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby. *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis*. (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 11

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