

Correspondence

The Effects of Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

Michael D. Cohen

Mark S. Bell

To the Editors (Michael D. Cohen writes):

In “Beyond Emboldenment,” Mark Bell develops a typology of six foreign policies—aggression, expansion, independence, bolstering, steadfastness, and compromise—that nuclear weapons might induce and specifies observable implications for each.¹ Bell’s article is an important contribution but suffers from two problems. First, these policies are not conceptually distinct and are very hard to empirically disentangle from aggression, the traditional focus of the nuclear emboldenment debate. Second, while the documentation of British bolstering is important, the evidence Bell presents in his case study suggests that aggression—at least of limited aims and over the short term—is precisely what nuclear weapons caused Britain to authorize. Bell’s theory and evidence make a weak case for looking beyond emboldenment defined as aggression in assessing the effects of nuclear weapons on foreign policy.

In his theory section, Bell differentiates expansion—defined as the development of new declared interests, alliances with states or nonstate groups, power projection capabilities, and dispute participants—from aggression—defined as new or greater coercion, conventional forces, tactics, doctrines, and risk-taking behavior in an existing dispute (pp. 94–95). Bell needs to explain whether “new” adversaries are those not previously fought by a leader, political party, or state in the last decade, century, or millennium. Expansion would be distinct from aggression only if it is not designed to support preexisting objectives with a long-time adversary. Bell needs to specify the extent to which the new interests must be unrelated to prior ones for them to be coded as expansion. He also needs to define expansion in a way that is distinct from the use of new tactics, forces, and military doctrines, because he defined such activity as aggression (*ibid.*). The only example of expansion that Bell offers is U.S. strategy after 1945, but the United States adopted this policy to deal with its arguably extant adversary the Soviet Union. The concept of expansion as currently specified does not add much to the debate about nuclear proliferation and foreign policy.

Bolstering is defined by Bell as one state’s offer of firmer defense commitments, forces/weapons systems, and resources to another (p. 98). Much of this, however, looks

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1. Mark S. Bell, “Beyond Emboldenment: How Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Can Change Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Summer 2015), pp. 87–119. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

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Table 1. Average British Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) Involvement over Different Periods

Years before and after developing nuclear weapons	1954–56	1953–57	1952–58	1951–59	1950–60	1949–61	1948–62
MIDS before nuclear weapon development	2	5	8	13	17	20	22
MIDs after nuclear weapon development	4	4	10	10	11	15	17
ratio of post-1955/ pre-1955 MID involvement	200%	80%	125%	77%	65%	75%	77%

perilously similar to aggression, which Bell defines to include the dedication of larger conventional forces to missions associated with a particular dispute (p. 94). If bolstering is distinct, analysts need to know that the provision or strengthening of an alliance or an ally's military power is not undertaken as a prelude to or to reduce the costs of aggression by that ally. For China's provision of sensitive nuclear materials to Pakistan to qualify as bolstering, analysts need to know more about how Beijing wanted the transfer to change Pakistan's policy toward India. Bell must specify the range of Chinese preferences and strategies that would constitute aggression rather than bolstering.

Bell defines independence as the criticism and undermining of the security of a state's allies, cooperation with its allies' adversaries, the authorizing of policies opposed by or unknown to its allies, and the withdrawal of the state from an alliance (p. 97). Very few nuclear powers—only Britain, France, and Israel—are members of alliances with more powerful nuclear states; independence meaningfully applies to the foreign policies of only one-third of the nuclear powers. Moreover, military actions without the support of allies are examples of aggression: aggression, by definition, implies independence. The increased willingness to criticize an ally, cooperate with its adversaries, engage in behaviors that the ally opposes, and not to inform it of taking nonaggressive actions are distinct from aggression, but these are common and may not result from nuclear proliferation. Finally, Bell acknowledges that most nuclear powers will be steadfast and that none may have compromised (p. 99).

Bell's selection of Britain seems an easy case for a theory that emphasizes alliance dynamics, because most nuclear powers have not had nuclear-armed allies with which they have closely integrated their nuclear forces. He argues that Britain did not become more aggressive after acquiring nuclear weapons in 1955, because it engaged in an average of 2.3 militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) per year in the decade following 1955 and an average of 2.6 MIDs in the preceding decade. Temporally disaggregating these results yields a very different conclusion, however. And as table 1 shows, whether Britain engaged in more disputes after developing nuclear weapons depends on where one looks. Britain engaged in more aggression in the three years after developing nu-

clear weapons than it did in the previous three years, and it was engaged in twice as many disputes in the year after developing nuclear weapons than the year before. These short-term effects wash out in aggregated assessments. Bell's conclusion that Britain did not become more aggressive after developing nuclear weapons is, in the short term, incorrect.

The cases that Bell uses to claim that Britain's possession of nuclear weapons fostered its independence also suggest that they caused aggression. Before Britain developed nuclear weapons, its policies regarding Anglo-Iranian oil, Egypt, and Buraimi exhibited no independence or aggression. But after its development of nuclear weapons in 1955, Britain's policies in Buraimi, Suez, Oman, and Jordan were independent and aggressive. Absence of evidence regarding Prime Minister Anthony Eden's emboldenment at Suez in 1956 is not evidence of absence. And if British policy in Suez is classified as aggression—as it must be—then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that nuclear weapons emboldened Britain to engage in limited aggression over the short term.

The conceptual looseness of Bell's typology as currently specified is evident in British policy at Suez, which could be defined as aggression (the invasion of Egypt), expansion (Britain had not fought Egypt before/for a long time), bolstering (providing support to French and Israeli allies), independence (from the United States), steadfastness (holding to its claim on Suez), and compromise (quitting Suez and eventually Egypt). Moreover, given British decline after 1945 it is not clear that foreign nuclear deployments played a large role in the downsizing of Britain's military strength and overseas interests, which observers widely viewed as inevitable.

In sum, the concepts of expansion, independence, and often bolstering are too easily conflated with aggression. Nuclear powers are almost always steadfast and hardly ever compromise. Bell's typology and British case study provide little support for analysts to move beyond the central question of when nuclear powers are emboldened to pursue aggression against other states.

—Michael D. Cohen
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Mark S. Bell Replies:

I appreciate Michael Cohen's attention to my article "Beyond Emboldenment."¹ His critiques, however, are unpersuasive.

In my article, I offer a typology of foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons can facilitate—aggression, expansion, bolstering, independence, steadfastness, and compromise. The typology allows analysts to move beyond catch-all terms such as "emboldenment," to describe more precisely how states have responded to nuclear acquisition and to better specify concerns about potential proliferants. These distinctions matter. For example, a potential nuclear-armed Iran that uses its nuclear weapons

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to facilitate belligerence against its neighbors (aggression) or strengthen its allies (bolstering) is more concerning than if Iran merely responded more firmly when challenged (steadfastness).

Cohen's first complaint is that the behaviors in my typology are "not conceptually distinct" and are hard to "disentangle from aggression." Cohen ignores the many indicators I offer to identify each behavior (pp. 94–99) and instead asserts that most responses to nuclear acquisition should simply be labeled as aggression. According to Cohen, behaviors including China's support for Pakistan (which I label as bolstering), France leaving NATO's command structure (independence), or Britain responding to challenges to its position (steadfastness) could all be considered instances of aggression. Indeed, Cohen claims that any "military action without the support of allies," whether offensive or defensive, counts as aggression. This expands the concept of aggression to such an extent that it robs it of analytic utility. In doing so, Cohen is guilty of the "conceptual looseness" of which he accuses me, and demonstrates exactly why a more discriminating typology is necessary.

Cohen also misunderstands my typology, which distinguishes among state behaviors and thus avoids the need to assess the goals driving those behaviors (p. 100). For example, Cohen argues that classifying China's assistance to Pakistan as bolstering or aggression requires knowing China's goals. This is wrong: knowing China's goals is not necessary to classify its behavior. This is a virtue of my typology because observing a state's behavior is easier than observing its goals. If one examines the indicators I offer, Chinese support for Pakistan constitutes an example of bolstering—taking actions that improve the credibility or strength of an alliance or ally (p. 97).

Other components of this critique are equally unpersuasive. For example, Cohen downplays the importance of independence because "few nuclear powers—only Britain, France, and Israel—are members of alliances with more powerful nuclear states; independence meaningfully applies to the foreign policies of only one-third of the nuclear powers." Even disregarding Cohen's error in omitting both Pakistan's and North Korea's long-standing alliance relationships with a more powerful nuclear-armed state (China), it is unclear why Cohen believes that independence should be considered less important if a third of nuclear-armed countries have used the acquisition of nuclear weapons toward this end. I doubt Chinese strategists share Cohen's disinterest in the possibility of North Korea using nuclear acquisition to facilitate independence.

Elsewhere, Cohen repeats points that I make in my article. He notes that it can be hard to distinguish between aggression and expansion; I agree and say so (p. 95). Cohen states that independence and aggression may often be observed together; I make this point (p. 97). Cohen states, "Nuclear powers are almost always steadfast and hardly ever compromise," again reiterating points I make (pp. 98–100).

Cohen's second critique is that nuclear weapons "caused [British] aggression." In contrast, I argue that Britain used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence from the United States, bolstering of junior allies, and steadfastness in response to challenges. Cohen's evidence, however, is unconvincing.

For example, I show that Britain did not engage in more militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) after acquiring nuclear weapons. In an effort to demonstrate otherwise, Cohen varies the time window with which to assess changes in British behavior. But of the seven alternative windows Cohen proposes, only two show an increase in MIDs

and the majority show a decrease. Cohen claims that Britain “engaged in twice as many” disputes the year after acquisition as before, but Britain is not coded as the revisionist party in any of them, suggesting that Britain was not pursuing goals beyond the status quo. Cohen’s own evidence, therefore, does not suggest that Britain used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression.

Similarly, Cohen asserts that British behaviors in Buraimi, Suez, Oman, and Jordan were “independent and aggressive,” but he offers no evidence to support this claim. I agree that Britain exhibited independence from the United States in these cases (pp. 112–118). In each, however, Britain was responding to challenges to the status quo (the nationalization of the Suez Canal, occupation of Buraimi, or the coup in Iraq) and/or was invited to intervene (Oman and Jordan). Within my typology, these actions are therefore better classified as steadfastness—standing more firmly in defense of the status quo—than aggression.

Finally, at a time when the literature increasingly recognizes the heterogeneity of ways in which states have operationalized and conceived of the political utility of their nuclear weapons, Cohen suggests moving in the opposite direction. Analysts, Cohen suggests, should not “move beyond” studying “when nuclear powers . . . pursue aggression.” Limiting the questions scholars ask in this way would be an enormous missed opportunity; I trust that scholars will reject this suggestion.

—*Mark S. Bell*
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