

Scott D. Sagan. 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' *International Security* 21, 3, Winter 1996/97, pp. 54-86.

Quick summary: *The widely held security (realist) model explanation for nuclear proliferation decisions is inadequate. Multicausality lies at the heart of the nuclear proliferation problem; different historical cases are best explained by different causal models(!). Three alternative theoretical frameworks/models are presented: a 'security model' (realist), a 'domestic politics model' (partially organization theory), and a 'norms model' (constructivist/sociological orgs theory). Non-proliferation policy should address the sources of the political demand for nuclear weapons, rather than focusing primarily on efforts to restrict the supply of specific weapons technology from the 'haves' to the 'have-nots.'*

What is the central puzzle?

The central question is, as the title suggests, why do states build nuclear weapons? The central puzzle centers on the inability of the prevailing 'realist' explanation (national security) to adequately explain *all* cases of nuclear proliferation.

What is the central answer(s)?

Sagan seeks to challenge the conventional wisdom about nuclear proliferation, namely that states will seek to develop nuclear weapons when they face a significant military threat that cannot be met through alternative means. Nuclear weapon programs, he argues, are more than simply tools of national security; they are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity.

Sagan examines three alternative theoretical frameworks/models and examines the evidence in the historical record for each:

1. **Security model: states build nuclear weapons to increase national security against foreign threats, especially nuclear threats.** 'Proliferation begets proliferation.' Basic realist story: black box of decision-making, acquisition of a nuclear deterrent is a form of internal balancing against external (primarily nuclear) threats (could also be deterrent against overwhelming conventional military threat or as a coercive tool to compel changes in the status quo). The Soviet Union acquired nukes to balance against the U.S.; Britain and France acquired them to deter the Soviet Union; China developed to deter the U.S. and the Soviets; India followed China; Pakistan followed India. South Africa and Brazil and Argentina abandoned programs when the security environment changed. *Policy implications:* maintain U.S. nuclear commitments to key allies and NPT solves collective action problem) but efforts will only slow down, not eliminate, the future spread of nuclear weapons. *Problems:* 1. History is biased – key decision-makers have a vested interest in explaining that choices they made served national interest; 2. Correlation in time between the emergence of a plausible security threat and a decision to develop nuclear weapons.
2. **Domestic politics model: nuclear weapons are political tools used to advance parochial domestic and bureaucratic interests.** Opens up black box of decision-making by emphasizing the domestic actors who encourage or discourage governments from pursuing the bomb, including: the state's nuclear energy establishment, important units within the professional military (esp. air force and navy), and politicians, parties, and mass public. Organization theory suggests bureaucracies may create the conditions that favor weapons acquisition by encouraging extreme perceptions of national threats, promoting supportive politicians, and actively lobbying for increased defense spending. Money and prestige for scientists and state laboratories. Domestic politics model best explains India's nuclear weapons experience (Chinese test produced a prolonged bureaucratic battle in New Delhi, domestic political/electoral reasons to support the bomb). South Africa is also examined with domestic political interests in mind. *Policy implications:* domestic-focused non-proliferation strategy (int. financial aid linked to nuclear restraint, providing technical information and intellectual ammo for domestic actors to encourage non-prolif pressures in other countries, encourage strict civilian control of military, provide alternative sources of employment and prestige to foreign domestic actors who might otherwise seek the development of nuclear programs). NPT regime is a tool that can help to empower domestic actors opposed to nuke development.
3. **Norms model: nuclear weapons decisions are made because acquisition, or restraint in weapons development, provides an important normative symbol of a state's modernity and identity.** 'Constructivist' story: state behavior is determined not by norms and shared beliefs about what actions are legitimate and appropriate in international relations. Sociological 'new institutionalism' explains institutional isomorphism. 'Interests' are shaped by social roles actors are asked to play and are pursued according to habits and routines as much as through reasoned decisions – embedded in a social environment that promotes certain structures and behaviors as rational and legitimate and denigrates others as irrational and primitive. Nuclear weapon programs serve as symbolic functions reflecting leaders' perceptions of appropriate and modern behavior. Nuclear acquisition may enhance the international prestige of the state. Sagan uses norms to explain French weapons policy (symbolic value of arsenal) and Ukraine (why they gave up their inherited nuclear arsenal). *Policy implications:* adjust policies to increase the likelihood that norms will push others toward non-prolif policies. Strengthen NPT norms; re-enforce emerging non-prolif norms. Encourage the development of other sources of international prestige.