

Tannenwald, Nina, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use", International Organization, 53,3 (Summer 1999), pp. 433-468

Question: the non-use of nuclear weapons since their inception cannot be explained only by material rationalism; even with the development of tactical nuclear weapons with minimal mass destruction capabilities (often less so than conventional weapons), states still were wary of using them

Thesis: nuclear taboo has delegitimized nuclear weapons as options in war, thereby stabilizing and restraining self-help behavior; norms do not determine outcomes, but they shape realms of possibility by influencing the probability of occurrence of certain actions

Anti-usage norms played three roles:

1. regulative / instrumental (initial stage of norm development): norms constrain behavior by making violation politically costly- leaders fear public opposition and loss of international prestige / reputation
2. substantive / constitutive (mature stage of norm development): taboo created categories actors use to understand:
 - a) weapons- NWs as illegitimate "weapon of mass destruction", distinguished from legitimate "conventional" weapons)
 - b) their identity- what it means to be a civilized state in the int'l community, one of the requirements of which is participating in the regulation of warfare (Re: Price on CWs)
3. permissive (externality of norms): taboo focused attention on nuclear weapons but led actors to ignore the development of conventional weapons with more devastating effects

Methodology: looks not only at outcomes, but at how actions were thinking during decision-making processes- how did they think of nuclear weapons (normative or rational) and of deterrence (what are "unacceptable costs"), re: Price on CW discourse

Historical development of NW taboo

1945 Japan: no nuclear taboo existed, so arguments for usage focused purely on the military / technical efficacy of the bomb

Korean War: norms operated instrumentally to increase costs of nuclear usage in terms of domestic and world opinion and international standing

- increasing public horror of NWs meant that usage would create the risk of escalation and lessen international support for US in other arenas (norms acted as regulatory constraints on leaders)
- at the same time, many American leaders believed that NWs were immoral except of retaliation or survival; increasing categorization of NWs as weapons of last resort (substantive, constitutive opposition)
- Truman's reluctance for NW usage led to less preparation for their tactical usage in battle (substantive opposition leading to strategic ineffectuality)

Vietnam War: even though winning the war was important for the US (domino theory) and the war was imposing high financial and humanitarian costs, NWs were never considered

■ this is surprising given the development of low-yield tactical NWs

Gulf War: case significant because it was the first major conflict in the post-Cold War era where the threat of nuclear confrontation with USSR was more or less gone

- similar to Vietnam, even with low-yield tactical NWs, usage was never considered
- destructiveness of NWs was no longer a prime concern, since "micronukes" could be more discriminatory than conventional attacks, which often destroyed infrastructure and caused civilian deaths due to diseases and lack of food / water / medical care
- constitutive anti-nuclear taboo was taken for granted for non-instrumental reasons, i.e. norm was constitutive and substantive

Concludes with paradox of deterrence: increasing taboo against nuclears means that threat of nuclear deterrence becomes less credible

Problem with this assertion: threshold increase means that tactical usage is unlikely, but desperation could still lead to strategic usage; moreover, taboo is against non-first use, which still makes deterrence viable