



BOOK REVIEW

SEEKING THE BOMB

Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation

By Vipin Narang

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In *Seeking the Bomb*, Vipin Narang sets out to do three things: identify the ways a state may pursue a nuclear capability, demonstrate the effectiveness of the Proliferation Strategy Theory (PST) framework, and show the impacts of different proliferation strategies. Narang's purpose for the book is to address a gap in proliferation scholarship. According to Narang, prior proliferation scholarship has focused on "why" states choose to pursue a nuclear weapon, ignoring "how" a state acquires a nuclear arsenal. Overall, Narang makes a compelling argument for PST, highlighting where it has successfully predicted a state's proliferation strategy and where it has failed.

The book opens with a discussion on the need to identify "how" states attempt proliferation to develop weapons. Narang identifies four major proliferation strategies: hedging, sprinting, sheltered pursuit, and hiding.¹ Following this introduction, Narang dedicates a chapter to explaining PST, how it is different from the existing theories, and why it is necessary for non-proliferation and counter-proliferation efforts. PST includes three groups of variables a state must consider before pursuing proliferation: security, domestic politics, and current non-proliferation efforts.² The chapter also discusses the limitations of the existing theories. His chapter explaining PST is well-written and if readers only read this section, they would be able to comprehend Narang's theory and have a basic understanding of the different proliferation strategies. This chapter does an excellent job laying a foundation for the rest of the book, which includes detailed discussion of the different proliferation strategies and the impacts to non-proliferation and counter-proliferation efforts.

The first strategy Narang delves into is the three types of hedging (technical, insurance, and hard) strategies. Narang describes hedging as taking deliberate steps to shorten the time to develop a nuclear weapon but stopping short of doing so.³ In this chapter he goes into detail on what differentiates the forms of hedging. It highlights how allies (Japan and Germany) used or are using insurance hedging to maintain US security commitments. Narang also discusses how Argentina and Brazil used technical hedging against each other. The case studies on hard hedging do a good job of showing how even traditionally neutral states (Sweden and Switzerland) have considered pursuing nuclear weapons. However, the highlight of this chapter is the discussion on India which does an excellent job illustrating that a state's proliferation strategy may change given new domestic and/or geo-political circumstances.

The second proliferation strategy addressed in detail is sprinting. Narang defines sprinting as openly seeking and developing a nuclear weapon capability as fast as possible.⁴ He highlights that the only states to successfully employ this strategy, from start to finish, are the Nuclear Weapons States authorized under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The case study on France highlights how a "hedger" may perceive security guarantees as being insufficient, decide to develop its own nuclear weapons program, and then sprint to develop the capability. In the case study on China, Narang touches on how the decision to build a nuclear weapon is mostly a political decision. He does this by highlighting that China, during the Great Leap Forward, which was

incredibly disruptive to society, developed a nuclear capability without foreign assistance. While sprinting is a successful strategy, it will probably not be available to most states in the future due to significant advances within intelligence communities and long-range military strike capabilities.

Sheltered Pursuit is the third strategy Narang discusses, using Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea as case studies. The chapter highlights how a proliferant state may take advantage of a unique relationship with a country, possibly due to geography (North Korea) or geo-political circumstances (Israel and Pakistan) to develop a nuclear capability. The point of this strategy is that a larger state already in possession of nuclear weapons can, under the right circumstances, be willing to look the other way and tolerate proliferation to achieve what may be perceived as more important and/or immediate policy objectives. A state using this strategy must recognize that there is only a small window of opportunity to develop a nuclear capability before its protector may deem the relationship less valuable. According to Narang, this strategy might be available to a few select states that have a special relationship with one or more of the current nuclear weapon states.

The last active pursuit strategy discussed is hiding and uses Iraq, Taiwan, and South Africa as case studies. According to Narang, the goal of a state taking this path is to hide its proliferation activities and present a *fait accompli* to the world with a credible claim or a demonstration of capability.⁵ He acknowledges the only state to succeed on this path is South Africa, which abandoned its nuclear arsenal shortly after announcing its existence to the world. This method of proliferation is incredibly destabilizing and if the state is discovered prior to developing a nuclear weapon it will probably face economic sanctions, military intervention, or both. Narang identifies that any future “hidiers” will already be members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and will have to attempt to develop a nuclear capability while being signatories of the NPT. This may make it more difficult to identify hidiers in the future.

Following the detailed discussions of the various proliferation strategies and the associated case studies, Narang lays out the impacts to global non-proliferation and counter-proliferation efforts. There is a heavy emphasis on influencing the “domestic political consensus” within proliferant states to either halt or turn-back their nuclear weapons program. He uses the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as an example for how to halt a proliferator. Narang addresses the positives of the JCPOA which, from the data he had access

to while writing, suggested that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program. He highlights this point to show that the sanctions relief was increasing domestic support for moderate political figures who may have been amenable to abandoning a nuclear capability. According to Narang, influencing domestic politics is the best method for convincing a state to abandon proliferation.⁶ He admits that this method does not immediately achieve the result of a completely surrendered nuclear weapons program but recognizes that the political leaders of the proliferant state will need to save face and giving concessions, such as sanctions relief, may build support for moderate factions that do not want a nuclear weapons program.

Overall, *Seeking the Bomb* is easy to understand and includes multiple case studies to support PST. It offers a novel framework for assessing how a state may approach nuclear proliferation, addressing a gap in the proliferation literature. Narang’s sequencing of variables for PST is logical and results in a fairly accurate methodology, with an 85% success rate for predicting a state’s proliferation strategy.⁷ I recommend this book for policy analysts, non-proliferation, and counter-proliferation professionals. This book, published in 2022, was written before Narang assumed the Office of the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy. It would be interesting to see if and how Narang would modify PST after holding this position. ■

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Notes

1. Vipin Narang, *Seeking the Bomb: Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 3.

2. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 29.

3. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 53.

4. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 127.

5. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 24.

6. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 339.

7. Narang, *Seeking the Bomb*, 345.