

Nuclear Weapons Testing as an Instrument for Advancing a State's Political Objectives

By: Lt. Col. Christopher Mihal

Introduction

Nuclear weapons tests are traditionally viewed as a means by which a state ensures the utility and capability of its nuclear weapons. However, nuclear weapons tests, when used for demonstrative rather than scientific purposes, are a public and unquestionably dramatic means by which a state can reinforce deterrence and demonstrate its technical capability and power. As such, it is surprising that there has been little research into the political effects of nuclear weapons tests. A cornerstone of nuclear deterrence is credibility, and one means by which a state can achieve credibility is by conducting a nuclear weapons test. Demonstrating a state's willingness to detonate a nuclear weapon reinforces a state's credibility and potentially effects the state's political outcomes.¹

Frankel, Scouras, and Ullrich, along with other defense community experts, debate the utility of the US resuming nuclear weapons testing.² Since February 2022, Russian officials and their allies have threatened nuclear strikes against the West 87 times.³ Russia has un-ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), while the dissolution of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces and Open Skies Treaty have further decayed arms control between the United States (US) and Russia. Policy experts in the US have begun debating whether a resumption of nuclear weapons testing aligns with the US' strategic interests.

Authors including Peters and O'Brien focused their debate on the technical need of testing new nuclear weapons systems, how a nuclear test will benefit US security, and the risks associated with other

countries resuming nuclear testing.⁴ Opponents to resuming nuclear testing note that states with nascent nuclear capabilities—e.g., North Korea—are much more likely to test to prove their systems work, whereas for the US, "the US nuclear arsenal's ability to inflict devastating damage on Moscow or Beijing is unquestionable to anyone with a pulse."⁵

Policymakers proposed reconvening nuclear weapons testing to demonstrate resolve, though it is not always clear that nuclear weapons testing is effective at signaling resolve.⁶ There may be times where conducting nuclear weapons testing signals a state's resolve, and this paper analyzes several case studies of when states potentially used nuclear weapons tests for political rather than scientific purposes.

Background

Ten countries have developed nuclear weapons since the nuclear age began in 1945, and of those, only one, South Africa, chose to relinquish its weapons. The list of 10 countries excludes countries that partnered with other countries for storing weapons at their sites. For example, the US stationed nuclear weapons in the homeland of several North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies and Russia placed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus in 2023.⁷ Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan authorized storing of Soviet nuclear weapons in their territories following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but all three states chose to return the weapons to Russia.⁸ States have chosen different means by when and how they conduct nuclear weapons tests, with two states choosing not to conduct any nuclear weapons

testing. Figure 1 shows the timeframe for when each nuclear weapons state acquired and ceased to test nuclear weapons.

Figure 1 illustrates that the US and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) conducted the majority of the nuclear tests, and they possessed approximately 90% of the total nuclear weapon stockpile.¹⁰ While some US and Russian nuclear weapons are stationed outside their respective countries, the nuclear weapons remain under the US and Russian control. By analyzing a selection of cases demonstrating significant moments in the history of nuclear weapons testing, this study seeks to answer the research question: *do states use nuclear weapons tests to advance political objectives?*

Literature Review

Research by Ramesh, Jacobs, Smith, Toshihiro, and others examining the politics of nuclear weapons testing specifically is surprisingly scant. Most research into nuclear weapons tests investigate either the sociopolitical aspect of site selection for the tests or the health effects on residents near such sites.¹¹ Given the continued impact and health effects of radioactive fallout on a population that had no real say in conducting nuclear tests on their territory—including Kazakhstan, Algeria, French Polynesia, and the Marshall Islands—it is understandable that a variety of human rights (and anti-nuclear) activists place great emphasis on this research. As individuals in states where nuclear testing occurred against the will of the local populace are still dealing with claimed health issues relating to fallout from nuclear testing to this day, the impact of so-called nuclear colonialism is a sensitive and easily studied topic for a wide range of academic fields according to Sheriff, Cooper, Schalk, and others' research.¹² However, broader research on the political, rather than human, impact of nuclear testing is minimal.

Studies, analyses, and interpretations of data and evidence currently existing on nuclear weapons tests is almost entirely technical, with little information on the effect nuclear weapons testing has on international

State	Year Nuclear Weapons Fielded	Year Ended Nuclear Testing	# of Tests
US	1945	1992	1,054
USSR/Russia	1949	1990	715
United Kingdom (UK)	1952	1991	45
France	1960	1996	210
China	1964	1996	45
India	1974	1998	3
South Africa	1979	No explosive testing	0
Pakistan	1998	1998	2
North Korea	2008	2017 / testing may be ongoing	6

FIGURE 1. Dates When States Acquired Nuclear Weapons, Ended Nuclear Weapons Testing, and Total Number of Tests by Country

relations and world politics. Important technical studies regarding nuclear weapons testing includes Yang, North, Romney, and Richards' worldwide nuclear explosions databases, a continually updated tally from Arms Control Today, as well as US-specific information from the Nevada Test Site (NTS).¹³ The NTS is now called the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS). The NNSS provides an overview of atmospheric nuclear weapons testing and the Catalog of Worldwide Nuclear Testing.¹⁴ Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of nuclear tests from 1945 to 2022.

Implementation of treaties such as the 1974 treaty between the US and the USSR known as the Treaty on the Limitation of Underground Nuclear Weapon Tests, limited tests to a maximum yield of 150 kilotons.¹⁶ Informal testing moratoriums between the US and USSR impacted the number of nuclear tests from 1958 to 1961. The 1961 moratorium ended when the USSR launched its largest test series ever and detonated the Tsar Bomba, the largest nuclear weapon known to date.¹⁷ The US announced a unilateral nuclear weapons testing moratorium in nuclear testing 1992.¹⁸ Current research omits examining nuclear weapons testing as an instrument for advancing a state's political objectives such as nuclear deterrence.

When it comes to nuclear deterrence theory, however, Mehta and Whitlark; Powell; Sagan; Walt; and Hopf provided a considerable body of research, beginning in the 1940s, that compares nuclear latency to nuclear acquisition and addresses how nuclear proliferation impacts deterrence. Walt, Hopf, and other researchers

identified how countries' decisions to enter alliances supported their security objectives and served as a form of nuclear deterrence.¹⁹ However, research by scholars such as Alexander Wendt and Scott Sagan identified a gap in information about states' use of nuclear testing for advancing political objectives. Academic scholars analyzed nuclear weapons acquisition more frequently than nuclear weapons testing and identified factors that influenced states' acquisition of nuclear weapons.²⁰ Wendt's constructivism theory explains how "five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than five North Korean ones, despite the material disparity, because of the different meaning and identities attached to both states." Wendt's theory reinforces the role a state's perception of another state plays when categorizing a state as a rival versus friend. Based on Wendt's theory, North Korea owning and testing a nuclear weapon is perceived and treated as a threat versus France's ownership and testing of a nuclear weapon.²¹

Research into states' decisions regarding nuclear weapons focuses specifically on acquisition of nuclear weapons, rather than the actual testing of the nuclear weapons.²² Works by Schilling and Rosenberg detail the logic behind acquiring a hydrogen bomb, the most advanced type of nuclear warhead yet developed. Deterrence research emphasizes that a state's nuclear deterrence must be credible—that is, if a state makes a nuclear threat, the state's opponent must believe that the state will deploy an operationally capable weapon.

Nuclear Weapons Testing Timeframes

A Presidential Decision Directive from the Department of Energy states that the timeframe it would take to renew nuclear weapons testing at the NNSS is 24-36 months.²³ This is significantly longer than historical tests, with data also from the NNSS indicating that a US test during the Cold War could take place anywhere from one to four months from the announcement of testing, and from 1961 to 1992 nuclear weapons tests were conducted on at least

Number of nuclear weapons tests, 1945 to 2022

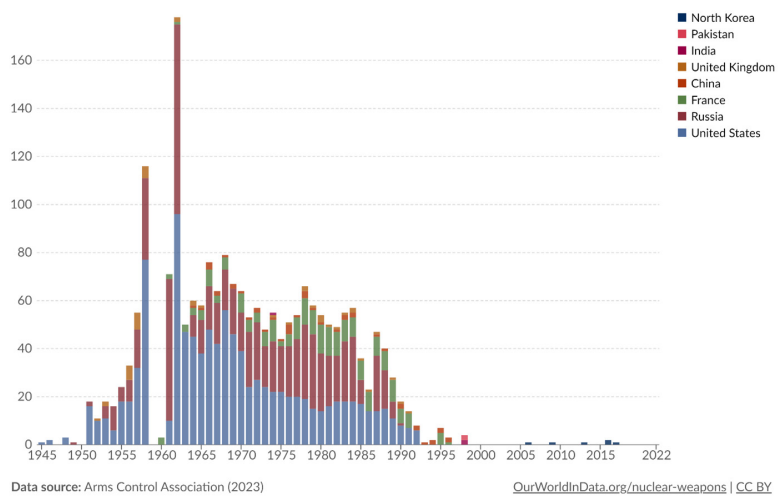


FIGURE 2. Global Nuclear Weapons tests by country.¹⁵

an annual basis.²⁴ Following the Soviet breaking of the three-year bilateral nuclear testing moratorium in September 1961, the US conducted 100 nuclear tests in just 14 months.²⁵ Even the US' first test after World War II, *Operation Crossroads*, required less than six months from conception to execution.²⁶

Evidence from nations other than the US points to potentially even shorter setup times for nuclear testing. In March 1998, India decided to conduct a nuclear weapons test and conducted the test a month later during May 1998. India claimed that they conducted the test to counter Pakistan's nuclear testing preparations. However, Pakistan claimed their decision to test on May 30, 1998, was due to the Indian testing earlier in the month according to Sublette and Khan's research. Another example of timetable acceleration is France's *Gerboise Verte* nuclear test on April 25, 1961. During a military coup in Algeria that began on April 21, 1961, France's government accelerated the final detonation of its *Gerboise* series of nuclear tests by several weeks. India, Pakistan, and France's nuclear weapons tests demonstrated states' ability to conduct nuclear weapons tests within weeks of the planning phase.

The timeframe for conducting a nuclear test can be indicative of its purpose. A very short time frame is a potential indicator that a nuclear weapons test is political or demonstrative in nature, while a lengthy lead time is more an indicator that a test is scientifically motivated.

Scientific Purposes of a Nuclear Weapons Test

The US Department of Energy lists six purposes for nuclear weapons tests – Joint US-UK tests, Plowshare, Safety Experiment, Vela Uniform, Weapons Effects, or Weapons Related.²⁷ Figure 3 shows the number of nuclear tests by purpose conducted by the US, along with the definition from the Department of Energy for each term.

Note that none of these official DoE nuclear weapons testing purposes explicitly state a political reason for conducting a test. However, there is evidence that some states designed their nuclear tests for demonstrative purposes, possibly for deterrence, to potential adversaries rather than for scientific reasons. The following case studies support how states used nuclear weapons tests to advance political objectives.

Case Studies: Potential Politically-Motivated Nuclear Weapons Tests

The US conducted *Operation Crossroads* in 1946 to advance political objectives. *Operation Crossroads* demonstrated the effect of nuclear weapons on surface vessels. Secretary of State James Byrnes contended that a public nuclear weapons demonstration might make the USSR “more manageable.”²⁹ J. Robert Oppenheimer himself, lead scientist for the

Manhattan Project, noted that the data from *Operation Crossroads*’ two nuclear detonations could have been obtained much more accurately and cheaply in a lab.³⁰ Foreign officials from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Soviet Union were all invited to the tests, which occurred in the remote Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. Bringing high-level officials from such disparate parts of the globe to such a geographically isolated area was clearly to demonstrate American might.³¹ The Soviet press downplayed the significance of the tests and referred to the destructive power demonstrated at Bikini Atoll as “disappointing.” The Soviets likely used the propaganda to shape the narrative with the Soviet populace until the Soviets built their own nuclear weapon.³²

The race between India and Pakistan to conduct their nuclear weapons tests in 1998 was illustrative, with both India and Pakistan blaming the other for being “forced” to do a nuclear test. P.K. Iyengar, a leading scientist from India, conducted India’s first nuclear test, codenamed the “Smiling Buddha,” in 1974. P.K. Iyengar decried that the 1998 Indian nuclear tests were conducted in haste because of intelligence information that Pakistan was preparing their own nuclear test.³³ Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif stated that Pakistan’s nuclear tests were because “our hand was forced by the present Indian leadership’s reckless actions [conducting a nuclear test].”³⁴ Both India and Pakistan cited intelligence that the other was

Nuclear Weapons Test Purpose	Definition	Number of Tests Conducted
Joint US-UK	A nuclear test conducted jointly by the US and UK under a cooperative agreement that has remained in effect between the two countries since August 4, 1958	28
Plowshare	A test in the Plowshare Program intended to explore the application of nuclear explosives to peaceful uses	36
Safety Experiment	An experiment designed to confirm that a nuclear explosion would not occur in case of an accidental detonation of the chemical explosive associated with the device	88
Vela Uniform	A US Department of Defense program designed to improve the capability to detect, identify, and locate underground nuclear explosions	7
Weapons Effects	A type of atmospheric test conducted to evaluate the civil or military effects of a nuclear detonation on various targets, such as military hardware	100
Weapons Related	A type of atmospheric test conducted for the purpose of testing a nuclear device intended for a specific type of weapon system	890
Total Nuclear Tests		1,149

FIGURE 3. US Department of Energy nuclear weapons testing purposes and their definitions.²⁸

preparing for a nuclear test as an excuse for conducting their own nuclear tests.³⁵ The signing of the CTBT in 1996 worried India, who felt that the treaty was biased against it, and so India began taking steps to solidify its nuclear program.³⁶ After becoming Prime Minister of India in 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee accelerated nuclear weapons testing, leading to India's Pokhran-II series of tests in May 1998, stating that nuclear weapons would demonstrate India's might and garner respect.³⁷ The Prime Minister of India's comments reinforced India's use of nuclear weapons testing for impacting political outcomes. Shortly after the Indian test, The Deputy Prime Minister of India, L.K. Advani, publicly warned Pakistan that it should tread carefully regarding the disputed Kashmir region.³⁸ Parthansarathi reported that the nuclear devices tested did not match the Indian government's claimed yield, further reinforcing potential links between nuclear testing and states' attempts to advance political outcomes.³⁹

Finally, France's *Gerboise Verte* nuclear weapons test, conducted in April 1961, offers two potential political reasons for the test. It is unknown whether France accelerated the test to prevent a nuclear device from falling into the hands of rebel generals attempting a coup in Algeria at the time, or if it was a signal to the world that the French government maintained control despite the putsch.⁴⁰ Evidence points to the French government deciding to test the device on the morning of April 24, 1961, and, despite adverse weather, conducting the test on April 25, 1961. The weapon's substantially low yield supported speculation that the French rushed testing but were able to collect useful data on the design of the implosion device used in the test.⁴¹ The coup failed the following day. This public display of a nuclear weapon may have also been a means to deter other nations from recognizing or even supporting the coup.

Conclusion

While examples certainly exist of states using nuclear weapons testing for demonstrative purposes to possibly influence political outcomes rather than for scientific purposes, these instances are significantly rarer than the primary reason for nuclear weapons testing, which is scientific in nature. When states perceive a significant threat, as in the case of Pakistan in 1998, or perceive a vulnerability, as France did in 1961, a state can use a nuclear weapons test to demonstrate resolve, to serve as a deterrence to adversaries, and to advance political objectives. During the deterioration of relations between the US and

USSR after World War II, the US chose to use nuclear weapons to signal to the conventionally superior Soviet Union that any military action would be unwise.

The only country to test in the 21st century has been North Korea. Although the CTBT is not legally binding, almost all nations abide by the testing moratorium imposed by it. States' willingness to abide by the CTBT underscores states' reluctance to use nuclear weapons testing for responding to threats in the last 25 years. North Korea conducted its nuclear tests with no significant military disputes nor outside provocation, to universal condemnation.

This article identified examples of how states use nuclear weapons tests to advance political objectives. Countries' willingness to conduct nuclear weapons tests reinforces their credibility as nuclear powers, serves as a deterrent to adversary states, and advances states' political objectives. The US' previous nuclear weapons tests solidified the US' willingness to use nuclear weapons and reinforced the US' global position as a nuclear power. With the US' nuclear posture and credibility to employ nuclear weapons, the US can continue to advance its political objectives in its role as a nuclear power without conducting future nuclear weapons tests. The US' current position in conducting nuclear tests while still advancing the US' political objectives may serve as an example for other nuclear armed states. ■

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