

Normative Approach to Nuclear Proliferation

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The “Normative Approach” is one of the approaches to explain the phenomenon of nuclear proliferation. According to this perspective, state behaviour is not determined by the cold calculations of leaders about national security or parochial domestic interests, but are rather based on “deeper norms and shared beliefs about what international actions are legitimate and modern”. [1]

According to this approach, arsenals and warheads are envisioned as serving symbolic functions like flags or aircrafts etc. They are part of international norm concerning what it means to be modern and legitimate state. [2] The symbolic meaning of international action is often contested at first and the resulting norms may be disseminated by power and coercion and not by the strength of an idea alone. Still, once created, such international norms can assume enormous significance and have a life of their own.

It is also true that nations go for nuclear weapons to enhance their political prestige and status in the international political realm and not just to enhance their military might. A State possessing these weapons is given greater weight in the entire range of foreign policy matters. Willaim Epistein points out six reasons for the acquisition of nuclear weapons which would in a way add to the political prestige of a nation. [3]

- a). To maintain or to acquire great power status.
- b). To be assured of a seat at the head tables of the international forums. This would be possibly only for the larger or more developed countries.
- (c) To enhance their prestige with in their region or subgroup states.
- (d) To readdress a perceived inferiority in the international hierarchy. This would rather apply to the former colonies as a vengeance to reach the power status of their former colonial masters.
- (e) To remove discriminatory aspects affecting their status, such as distinction between nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapon states.
- (f) To demonstrate political independence and self reliance and ability to resist political pressures from nuclear super powers.

Another dimension of normative approach is the psychological analysis. The concept of “belief systems” [4] has been applied to explain exactly this type of phenomenon. [5]

The approach is based on the assumption that beliefs and actions are linked, and that foreign policy decision-making cannot be fully understood unless the beliefs of the decision makers are taken into account.⁶ For example, psychologists argue that irrational behaviour often occurs during crisis situations, which increases the tendency of decision makers to apply simplified images of reality that are highly resistant to change.

This simplification often ignores valid information contradicting their beliefs.[7] Irrational foreign policy decisions are also taken because decision makers have a tendency to presume that others share their worldview and because they are not always aware of the impact that their decisions will have. Moreover, since the decision-makers' understandings of the behaviour of others are shaped by their own beliefs, they sometimes mis-interpret the signals they receive from others, leading to their unexpected behaviour. In psycho-analytical terminology: "belief systems impose cognitive restraints on rationality...erecting barriers to the types of information that (decision makers) consider valuable." [8]

A common criticism of the belief systems approach is that it is most suited in explaining the actions of individuals, but is unable to explain why groups adopt similar or identical beliefs about certain issues, even in absence of objective information. Peter Lavoy addresses this question specifically in relation to nuclear proliferation, and develops what he calls the "myth maker" model, as a solution.[9] Lavoy's main aim is to explain why nuclear weapons spread, despite the uncertainty surrounding them and despite their potentially disastrous consequences. He argues that this occurs because those national elites, who want the state to develop nuclear weapons, emphasise the country's security problems and the political and military strength that nuclear weapons will provide, creating the nuclear myth. The concept of the nuclear myth is important, because due to the lack of objective information about the relationship between nuclear weapons and war beliefs about nuclear weapons are based on "logic and faith" and therefore constitutes myth rather than a fact.

References

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