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Nuclear weapons and American grand strategy

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Francis J. Gavin, Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020xviii+300 pp.

Francis Gavin's book undertakes to analyse a contemporary topic: the relationship between nuclear weapons and US grand strategy. There is a vast literature on this, which spans several decades. Much ink has been spilled, for instance, on why states want nuclear weapons, what nuclear weapons mean for US grand strategy, whether nuclear weapons contributed to the *Long Peace*. Yet, as the author correctly argues, the need to elucidate the role that nuclear weapons play in the designing and execution of US grand strategy is pressing. The book is presented as a collection of nine essays, which are broadly related to one another. This makes it somewhat difficult to follow a structure. The *fil rouge* of this book appears to be the author's willingness to dig deeper in terms of what nuclear weapons bring to US grand strategy. It does not really advance an overarching argument in a compelling way from start to finish. Subsequently, the book adds to the existing literature in its own way. It is a little bit unconventional as it tries to steer away from many of the views, which have been influential. For example, we tend to take it for granted that nuclear weapons are useful to deter an adversary, that nuclear weapons are very important to advance US interests, and that the US should aim to limit the number of states possessing them. Incidentally, these views play out in the ways in which the US has sought to advance its grand strategy since the end of World War II. Gavin's book mostly reads well as he ably asks many far-reaching questions. He often reminds the reader of the sensitivities associated with nuclear weapons and of the need to play safe when engaging with other states. 'Fewer nuclear weapons in the world is probably a good thing, but using force of coercion to achieve that goal is probably not' (p.168), Gavin asserts.

Whilst this is mostly a refreshing read with plenty of historical examples, mainly drawn from the Cold War, there are some shortcomings, which impair the analytical punch of the book. The advantage of this book, in its being presented as a collection of essays, ends up being a bit of a disadvantage as the reader seeks for an answer or for some original insight into the role of nuclear weapons in US grand strategy. Gavin carefully downplays the ambitions of the book himself, as he states 'I have no answers to any of these challenges, or the others that burden efforts to address the

nuclear issue' (p.22). He also detaches the analysis from committing to any particular method as he competently states that 'nuclear policy is shrouded in secrecy, and evidence is hard to come by' (p. 17). Subsequently, the reader delves into several attempts, from one essay to the next, to revisit existing debates on nuclear weapons and their relationship with US grand strategy. Gavin does so, for instance, in chapter two 'Fixing the Franchise: The Ivory Tower-Policy Gap' (p. 23). The author revisits the well-known debate between Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, which resulted in three different contributions to the literature (1995; 2002; 2012). Gavin takes issue with the failure to engage with history and policy relevance. Admittedly, neither Waltz's nor Sagan's theory looks in depth at the *politics* surrounding how decisions to acquire nuclear weapons were made. Still, they both offer alternative ways to understand and make sense of questions such as 'should states seek to acquire nuclear weapons or not?'. The theoretical reasoning behind Waltz's and Sagan's arguments would arguably deserve a bit more than a book chapter to unpack it and debunk it if need be. The policy relevance of Sagan's and Waltz's work is also something, which Gavin brings up. He argues there is a disconnect between theory and policy: Waltz's arguments are not taken into account by decision-makers and neither are Sagan's. Still, Gavin does not explore the issue further enough to help the reader understand why there is an alleged disconnect between international relations theory and the work of national security officials. The reader is left wondering about what the answer is, if it exists, to big and compelling questions: how big a gap is there between international relations theory and policy-making? To what extent should international relations theory inform policy-making? How can policy-making account for the diversity of perspectives in international relations theory?

In terms of where this leaves us, Gavin seems to concede that 'nuclear weapons made total, thermonuclear war a horrifying absurdity to avoid at all costs' (p.196). Subsequently, we did not really seem to move away from the insight and record that nuclear weapons contribute to deterrence. However, Gavin calls for ways in which the story of nuclear weapons and the ways in which they linked to US grand strategy to be re-evaluated. If that were the case, Gavin wonders whether a grand strategy that seeks a world with fewer nuclear weapons, or even none at all, would help the US to advance its interest. It is, again, up to the reader to think whether the approach

chosen by Gavin in this book would help to re-think government policy and whether it would break through the complexities of international politics. Moreover, to what extent would a re-examination of cold war history help us to understand what to do about the nuclear ambitions of say, North Korea, with which, oddly, the book never really engages.

Despite the limitations, which were identified, the book still represents a stimulating read. It will be a useful addition to reading lists of courses on strategy and security studies, helping students who are either willing to engage with a different approach or are seeking for one, on the role of nuclear weapons in US grand strategy. It is also important to be reminded that greater effort is needed to understand and empathise with the concerns of policy-makers. Contributions to the literature on nuclear weapons do not always do that but Gavin's book does so sensibly.

References

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