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Book Review

The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy. Why Strategic Superiority Matters

Kroenig, Matthew

Oxford University Press, 2018, 352 pages, ISBN 9780190849191 (updf) | ISBN 9780190849207 (epub) | ISBN 9780190849184 (hardcover), Price: \$24.59 (hardcover).

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Matthew Kroenig is among the best regarded names of the modern generation in the nuclear policy and deterrence fields. He is the author of several books and has had a stellar career in both the policy and academic fields, giving him an indubitable edge in translating from English to English - that is, 'policy-ese' English to 'academish' English, and vice-versa. Kroenig is a scholar-practitioner by training having served in the Pentagon, on Presidential campaigns, and currently holding position as Associate Professor at Georgetown University's Department of Government.

Professor Kroenig's newest book, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, may sound familiar to those with a background in the niche domain of nuclear deterrence and strategy. Robert Jervis in the 1980s published a similar sounding work - *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*. While Jervis' central point was that "no strategy can provide the kind of protection that was possible in the past," Kroenig endorses the view that nuclear superiority matters. He goes against the academic grain that maintains that an assured nuclear second-strike capability is enough, and anything beyond that is "overkill." Kroenig observes that nuclear superiority is not overkill, but rather creates a better system of deterrence and the concomitant ability to wipe out more of the adversary's nuclear weapons stockpiles in case of war, thus enhancing security. Kroenig thus tips his hat to Jervis but turns the latter's work on its head by describing the logic rather than the illogic of US nuclear strategy. Kroenig asserts this is because "a robust nuclear force reduces a state's expected cost of nuclear war, increasing its resolve in high-stakes crises, providing it with coercive bargaining leverage, and enhancing nuclear deterrence."

Kroenig's book is compiled in part from some of his earlier articles published in various journals. There is a helpful glossary of key terms right at the start for the uninitiated. A Morgenthau-esque opening statement: "Nuclear weapons have returned to the center of politics among nations" serves as a "roadmap" for the reader, making the direction of the book clear at the very outset. The book is divided into two main sections - the first discussing the advantages of nuclear superiority for the United States, the second questioning the stereotypical perceived disadvantages of US nuclear superiority. Kroenig concludes that nuclear superiority is an asset, and there is little to no tangible evidence to suggest that the United States should not maintain this position of nuclear dominance.

The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy draws on what are already well-developed areas of research. The primary question Kroenig raises is what kind of nuclear strategy and posture would the US need in the current time (considering his view that nuclear weapons and

deterrence are factors here to stay) for self-preservation as well as the guaranteed security of its allies? Through his superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory, he argues that nuclear superiority or "military nuclear advantages increase a state's willingness to run risks in international conflicts" through a combination of several factors, such as reducing a state's expected costs of war, increasing its resolve, and providing it with a coercive advantage over states more prone to nuclear exchanges. For Kroenig, therefore, superiority-brinkmanship synthesis is the ideal nuclear weapons policy that the US government should adopt and maintain.

Professor Kroenig's book is a fascinating starting point for the layperson and an equally reinvigorating continuation of the larger debate on the efficacy of nuclear weapons. His calculations are meticulous, and clearly a lot of work has gone in to produce such a first-rate piece. However, I do have a few submissions of my own contrary to his point of view.

First, the nuclear superiority policy has its own maladies. It is hard to imagine a Russia or a China today 'sitting on their hands', to borrow Carl Sagan's old phrase, if the US were to consolidate or further its nuclear weapons development. Allowing an absolute US power preponderance would be well-nigh unacceptable to these states, and the latter are both technologically capable.

Second, Kroenig observes that in a game of chicken (as made immortal by the James Dean starrer *Rebel Without a Cause* and then Thomas Schelling), we might expect the smaller car to swerve first even if a crash is disastrous for both. Chairman Mao, however, as early as in 1956 referred to the US as a 'paper tiger' - referring not to the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog. There is sense to that statement. If the smaller car always swerves first, then neither the US debacle at Chinese hands during the Korean War nor in Vietnam would have occurred (and those were not even nuclear weapons states at the time).

Third, while Kroenig argues that there is meaningful variation in the expected cost of nuclear war even at high levels of devastation, would either side be ready to accept the 'unacceptable damage' caused by nuclear war? In a battle of attrition, therefore, are 10 million fatalities of their own compared to 100 million of another country really acceptable to Americans or their leadership? American nuclear weapons after all are primarily for deterrence. Robert Strausz-Hupe observed during the Cold War that the West abhors war and their nuclear weapons are for maintaining status quo. Therefore, it is hard to grasp which US President would in a real-world situation risk provoking a countervalue retaliation even if one or two major American cities were at stake? While Kroenig's analyses are indeed intellectually satisfying, the reality is perhaps more nuanced. Kroenig also does not seem to factor in adequately certain other variables such as the effects of radioactive fallout, the land area or relative economic might of states, and the resolve or morale of an adversary. In Kroenig's nuclear superiority definition, it is not entirely clear how costs for a country are measured when it comes to a nuclear exchange.

Fourth, the burning question of terrorism is also not addressed in this book at all. Perhaps it is beyond the ambit of a nuclear deterrence strategy designed for states. While such a strategy may be somewhat useful, terrorism is a reality today more so than ever before, and a section addressing that, rather than only looking at interstate nuclear strategy would have been more up-to-date with the times, as is evident from the inclusion of a section on nuclear terrorism in the 2018 US *Nuclear Posture Review*. After all, interstate wars are growing more and more infrequent. While deterrence is important, much of the focus of study these days (despite the

threat the US feels from a rising China, Russia, and Iran and North Korea as well) has shifted from the state to terrorism and non-state actors. Deterrence does not matter when it comes to these shadowy entities, and an American nuclear strategy meant to be used against rival states is of little use against such elusive targets. Even when it comes to states, deterrence is a matter of perception, not just numbers - and that is a complex psychological process. Sometimes, acolytes around Trump, for instance, might say those things he would like to hear (similar to a tendency seen earlier in dictators such as Hitler and Stalin, among others). Deterrence is psychological - how do you scare someone who is not willing to be scared?

Finally, with reference to the US defense budget, Kroenig observes that about five per cent of it, or one per cent of its national budget, is spent on nuclear weapons. We are talking about one per cent of the budget of an economic powerhouse here and not one per cent of the budget of a small nation like Fiji. That is a big deal. One must consider to what end these nuclear weapons are being maintained at such high costs. Getting rid of most or all for a price might even encourage other countries to start giving up nuclear weapons. Going the age-old social service argument route, one per cent of the US budget could probably bring all or most of US homeless people off the streets, be used to improve the ageing airport infrastructure in many major cities, or perhaps toward other constructive objectives like improving healthcare. A military-industrial complex mentality is rather profligate and destructive, somewhat akin to perhaps an "everyone's out to get us" mentality. As for the protection Washington affords its allies, perhaps Washington could also provide a timeline and ask its allies to look out for themselves in a decade or two - something President Trump has already been discussing with European allies in terms of having them shouldering their pecuniary responsibilities and spending more on NATO. While that may or may not affect US nonproliferation goals, perhaps an approach of disentanglement globally from the affairs of other states too would create an atmosphere of lesser rivalries, where Washington does not have to constantly look over its shoulder. Many of the world's states after all are thriving economically without nuclear weapons. The same funds can perhaps help beat a virus like the novel corona, the costs of battling which are turning out to be exorbitant. What is the point in sanitizing the surfaces of ICBMs lying around unused for 70 years and wasting precious Lysol?

Kroenig's writing style is easy to grasp and makes for a comfortable read, I would anticipate, for both the curious layperson as well as for the proficient nuclear strategist. The book contains some robust explanations and logic in simple language. Despite a few small typos (for instance, p. 42 - Alex Wellerstein instead of Wallerstein; or p. 140 - in order to avoid instead of in order, avoid, etc.), the flow of thought is smooth, and organization of the work is impeccable. Kroenig also anticipates many of the questions his audience may have about his thesis and provides answers as best he can in advance.

Kroenig includes both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as well as foreign policy analyses that are highly detailed. While many political science works attempt to explain a single dependent variable, this book focuses on how a single independent variable, nuclear posture, affects several, separate but related, dependent variables: nuclear war outcomes, nuclear crisis outcomes, deterrence and compellence, stability (nuclear power preponderance is preferable), arms races, nuclear proliferation, and the defense budget. Thus, one Independent Variable leading to multiple Dependent Variables contribution (what policymakers often struggle with and need). Subtleties such as this combining both theoretical and methodological rigor in a form palatable to practitioners and academics alike makes this a perfect start to Oxford University Press' *Bridging the Gap* series.

Therefore, in his examination of the central question of the book, of whether Washington is pursuing some illogical, irrational, and illusory strategic advantage via an unsound nuclear strategy vis-a-vis other states, or whether the existing notions of strategic stability themselves do not hold water, Kroenig does a masterful job overall. It is little wonder then why he is so sought after as a nuclear deterrence and strategy expert in the present day.