

# Why Do States Give Up the Bomb? A Defensive Realist Explanation of Nuclear Rollback

by

Halit Mustafa Tagma

School of Politics and Global Studies

Arizona State University

Box 873902

Tempe, AZ 85287-3902

Fax: (480) 965-3929

Web: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~htagma/>

Email: [halit.tagma@asu.edu](mailto:halit.tagma@asu.edu)

## ABSTRACT

Realists have been silent on a state's decision to eliminate its entire nuclear arsenal, partly because giving up military capabilities seems counterintuitive to Realism's logic. The nonproliferation literature, on the other hand, has characterized Realism as failing to come to grips with the complex nature of a state's decision making processes. The nonproliferation literature has produced rich empirical details of nuclear rollback; however, much of this literature lacks a general theoretical framework to provide generalizable explanations and predictions. In this essay I advance two defensive Realist hypotheses on state behavior to explain nuclear rollback. I argue that states may voluntarily eliminate their own capabilities in order to survive in an anarchic order, when in the absence of a secure second strike capability, they make the rational decision to give up their nuclear stockpile. However, the absence of a secure second strike capability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for nuclear disarmament. The absence of a dyadic existential threat is also a necessary condition for a state to give up its nuclear weapons. Together these two conditions, from a defensive Realist perspective, are jointly necessary and sufficient for nuclear disarmament. I test my theory not only against those states that eliminated their nuclear weapons, but also against those who continue to possess nuclear capabilities. The findings suggest that incentives for disarmament, from a Realist perspective, can be understood by taking into account the strategic interaction that states find themselves in vis-à-vis their environment and capabilities. The essay also assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of two dominant theories in North American IR scholarship, offensive and defensive realism, in explaining an important issue in international security.

Keywords: Realism, Nuclear Weapons, Nonproliferation, IR theory