

Title: On Nuclear Superiority and Coercive Leverage
Speaker: Dr. Alexander Debs
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POC: Dr. Phil Haun

SYNOPSIS:

Does nuclear superiority improve national security? This question is currently debated between proponents of the Theory of the Nuclear Revolution (TNR) and its critics, yet each perspective has its limits. TNR assumes that greater nuclear capabilities do not matter militarily. It is then unsurprising that they bring no diplomatic dividends. TNR critics mainly applaud the peacetime benefits of nuclear superiority, but such benefits rest on shaky foundations, if nuclear superiority does not provide coercive leverage in crises. I study this question using a game-theoretic model, where states exchange compellent and deterrent threats and bargain over an issue in dispute, assuming that greater nuclear capabilities matter militarily. I show that greater nuclear capabilities can provide coercive leverage, but only by raising the risk of nuclear war. It is unclear, then, whether they improve national security. I discuss the implications of this result for the debate between TNR proponents and its critics.

BIOs:

Alexandre Debs is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Political Science at Yale University.

Alexandre's research focuses on the causes of war, nuclear proliferation, and democratization. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in top political science and international relations journals, such as the American Political Science Review, the American Journal of Political Science, the Journal of Politics, International Organization, and International Security. He is the author of the book Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation (with Nuno Monteiro), published by Cambridge University Press in 2017.

Alexandre received a Ph.D. degree in Economics from M.I.T., an M.Phil. in Economic and Social History from the University of Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and a B.Sc. in Economics and Mathematics from Université de Montréal.