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# Public opinion, commitment traps and nuclear weapons policy

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## PASCC Final Report

“Public Opinion, Commitment Traps, and Nuclear Weapons Policy”  
Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University  
Scott D. Sagan<sup>1</sup>  
November 2015

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### Project Summary

It is widely believed by policymakers and scholars alike that a deep aversion against the use of nuclear weapons has taken hold around the world in the years since 1945. Indeed, many have even referred to the existence of a “nuclear taboo.” Unfortunately, we lack empirical evidence about the strength of such “antinuclear instincts” and the conditions under which they might or might not operate in the U.S public and in other nations.

With funding from the Naval Postgraduate School’s Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, Scott D. Sagan at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University undertook a project to conduct original research on public attitudes toward nuclear weapons use, the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC), and just war doctrine principles. Utilizing the survey experiment methodology, we<sup>2</sup> studied the specific scenarios in which the U.S. public and the Indian public would support the use of nuclear weapons or exert a constraining influence. The project evaluated how the following four factors influence public support for the use of nuclear and conventional weapons: 1) the impact of specific threats made by leaders (*the commitment trap*); 2) the significance of the kind of adversary target (foreign government or non-state group); (3) the importance of the “principle of proportionality” and saving the lives of one’s own soldiers compared to sparing

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<sup>1</sup> Grant No. N00244-14-1-0057

<sup>2</sup> Scott D. Sagan (Stanford University) and Benjamin A. Valentino (Dartmouth College)

the lives of non-combatants in an adversary's state; and (4) the influence of the principle of noncombatant immunity in general.

This project had two main deliverables: (1) survey experiments studying the conditions under which the American and Indian publics support the use of nuclear weapons and whether the public is strongly constrained by the LOAC and just war doctrine; (2) research publications and a policy outreach program, including at least one research paper submission to an influential scholarly journal and policy-focused publications and briefings with the aim of reaching a wider policy audience.

The timeline for completion of key project milestones included in our technical proposal was calculated based on an anticipated award start date of May 1, 2014. Because the award period began on August 11, 2014, completion dates for milestones were pushed back slightly. The survey experiments studying the U.S. public opinion were successful, and we have so far produced four research papers, one of which has been accepted for publication, and a published policy-focused piece based on our research findings.

We did, however, encounter several challenges with the Indian polling company, IPSOS. Due to technical difficulties, we are still awaiting the survey results from India, and can therefore not report on the analysis of the Indian public opinion on the use of nuclear weapons and just war doctrine yet. We anticipate the survey experiment data to be completed by December 1, 2015, and have planned analysis and policy outreach meetings in India by the end of December 2015. The details of this delay are discussed later in the report.

## **Survey Experiments**

In order to study the micro-foundations of public willingness to use force against non-combatants, and to investigate public opinion on the tradeoff between killing civilians in the adversary state and saving the lives of own troops, we conducted survey experiments

studying the conditions under which the American public's support the use of nuclear weapons, conventional attacks, and whether the public is strongly constrained by principles of just war doctrine. Upon publication, the results of each of these surveys will be made available on-line for the use of other scholars.

We developed and deployed our set of U.S. survey experiments through YouGov/Polimetrix<sup>3</sup> in two rounds. The first round of polling was conducted in August 5-11, 2014, and we received the polling results for round one on August 14, 2015. The second round of polling was deployed in July 23-30, 2015, and we received the survey results on August 2, 2015. The experiments included: 1) An experiment assessing the impact of specific threats made by leaders on U.S. public support for use of nuclear and conventional weapons against North Korea in the event of North Korean chemical weapons use; 2) An experiment assessing U.S. public views on the use of nuclear and conventional weapons against Iranian nuclear facilities to halt Iran's nuclear program; 3) An experiment assessing the impact of the size of Iran's nuclear arsenal on public support for different types of U.S. responses to Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf; and 4) A set of experiments assessing the alignment of the U.S. public's views with just war doctrine principles—including the principle of proportionality, distinction and due care — in decisions to support the use of force against military targets.

Prior to deploying our U.S. and Indian surveys, we consulted a small group of specialists—Brad Roberts (former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy), Vipin Narang (MIT), Neil Joeck (University of California-Berkeley), and Zachary Davis (Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory)— for feedback on the scenarios and survey design.

The results from these experiments indicated that while the commitment trap does exert some influence on public opinion, these effects are often dwarfed by other concerns such as pre-existing views on the use of nuclear force in high-stakes scenarios involving potential

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<sup>3</sup> An internet polling and experimental research company.

nuclear use. We found that in scenarios set in North Korea and Iran, the U.S. public was more influenced by concerns about projected military effectiveness of various options, rather than leaders' previous statements of intent. Interestingly, we found little evidence that North Korea's initial development of an "existential deterrent" based on uncertainty about whether it had a hidden nuclear bomb prior to the 2006 test, nor in Iran's possession of a single nuclear weapon in the future, strongly affects American public willingness to attack their nuclear programs or to respond to conventional provocations. Public opinion is therefore not likely to serve as a constraint on the U.S. government's willingness to respond to challenges by a nuclear-armed adversary until that state has developed a secure second strike nuclear arsenal. We have also found that the American public is willing to significantly increase the number of foreign non-combatants deliberately killed, if the attack is expected to signal others not to behave in ways antithetical to U.S. national security interests.

In April 2015, we finalized a set of survey experiments to be deployed in India to shed light on public support for nuclear use as outlined by current Indian nuclear doctrine. The first line of experiments explored how different types of provocation on the part of Pakistan – including tactical nuclear use against Indian forces both within Pakistani and Indian territory – might influence the Indian public's willingness to use nuclear weapons against Pakistani targets. The second set of experiments tested the presence of the nuclear taboo among the Indian public by asking respondents to indicate preference for and approval of nuclear versus conventional strikes in hypothetical military crises. The third and final set of India surveys gauged Indian public support for preemptive nuclear strikes against Pakistan and China in hypothetical military crises. The drafts of these surveys were finalized and Stanford University negotiated the polling Contract with IPSOS. We were forced to postpone deployment of our India surveys to April 10, 2015, to allow time for finalization of an agreement and securement of IRB approval from Stanford for this international survey work.

We received the initial survey data from IPSOS, our Indian polling company, in mid-April 2015. There were, unfortunately, apparent technical problems in the surveys done in smaller

villages and in the translation of the survey into multiple Indian languages leading us to lack confidence in the survey results from fieldwork in Delhi, Jaipur, Chennai, and Mumbai. The technical challenges we faced with IPSOS made it difficult for us to reach the milestones we had set for the India research. Fortunately, we reached an understanding with IPSOS, which will relaunch the survey experiments using internet polling techniques in English to supplement the door to door polling that we had initially planned. These surveys will be more reliable in their content, though we recognize that the population will over-represent the Indian elite rather than the general public. These survey results are scheduled to be ready by December 1, 2015, and we have scheduled a policy outreach trip to New Delhi, using funds from another grant, for late December 2016.

### **Scholarly Articles and Policy-Focused Publications**

The second main deliverables of the project were to write up the results of the survey experiments in research papers as well as publishing a policy-focused piece and briefing the results to policy audiences.

In the first quarter of 2015, we wrote the paper “Just a War Theory? American Public Opinion on Ethics in Military Combat.” In this paper, Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino explore the “micro-foundations” of American views on the use of military force and the extent to which the American public’s views are consistent with the Laws of Armed conflict and the principles of just war doctrine. In our examination of attitudes towards the *jus in bello* principle of proportionality, we found that Americans are less willing to inflict collateral deaths on foreign civilians when the military advantage derived from destroying a target is lower. Regarding the principle of due care, we found that many Americans are willing to risk the deaths of U.S. soldiers to prevent a larger number of enemy civilian deaths. However, the public’s commitment to the principles of proportionality and due care was very biased in favor of protecting American lives and national security interests, which suggest only limited support for traditional interpretations of just war theory. Furthermore, we found little evidence that

the public supports the principle of distinction (non-combatant immunity) and that many Americans consider any foreign civilian who supports an adversary's government to be a legitimate target, which would be a violation of the Laws of Armed Conflict.

In the second quarter of 2015, we revised this draft paper based on the preliminary findings from the just war doctrine experiments. The paper was revised to reflect feedback gathered from presentations at Stanford University, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Indiana, and the University of Minnesota. We submitted the paper to the journal *International Organization* (IO). IO did not accept the article, but we received valuable feedback from the reviewers and have since revised the paper and are submitting it to the influential scholarly journal *World Politics*.

A second project paper -- Benjamin Valentino's "Moral Character or Character of War? American Public Opinion on the Targeting of Civilians in Times of War" -- examined why America has maintained the policy of relative restraint, when none of its adversaries possess the capability to retaliate against the United States. Drawing on historical material and the survey experiments conducted as part of the PASC project, he suggested that the transformation of U.S. war efforts could be explained by the shift in the norms surrounding the targeting of civilians; by the changing views about the effectiveness of targeting civilian populations and the public favoring the minimization of non-combatant casualties as a key to victory in counter-insurgency warfare; and the drop in American military fatalities since World War II, which reduces the temptation to end war quickly with large-scale attacks. Valentino highlighted that the important change has not been in the moral character of Americans, but rather the changing character of wars that America has fought, especially since Vietnam. The paper was reviewed at a conference at West Point in November 2015 and has now been accepted for publication in the Fall 2016 special issue of the journal *Daedalus* produced by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Technology, Ethics, and War project.

In addition we wrote the piece "Crossing the Nuclear Line: American Attitudes on Using Force Against Proliferating States" (co-authored with Benjamin P. Buch, Stanford University), in which we explore the deterrent power of nuclear weapons. In this paper, we challenge the conventional claim of "existential deterrence", which suggests that once a potential adversary has developed a nuclear bomb, military options are taken off the table. Drawing on historical evidence and two survey experiments, we conclude that the U.S. government and public are not deterred from launching a strike on an adversary, in the early stages of that adversary's development of a nuclear arsenal. We presented the paper at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and plan to submit the paper to the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* for potential publication this winter.

We have also written a working paper based on the survey experiments of the U.S. public opinion on nuclear weapons use and just war principles, entitled "Atomic Attraction: Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran". In October 2015, the paper was presented at seminars at MIT, Princeton, the Belfer Center at Harvard, and at the Just War Conference in Monterey, organized by the NPS. The paper demonstrates, contrary to wide-spread views among policy makers and scholars, that there is only weak acceptance of a "nuclear taboo", and that a large majority of the U.S. public is willing to use nuclear weapons against Iran if such use is considered necessary to avoid the deaths of U.S. military personnel through ground attacks in any future war. We plan to submit the piece for publication in a major journal in early 2016.

Finally, in July 2015, we published a policy-focused piece in *OpenGlobalRights* - a multi-lingual, online forum for human rights activists, commentators and academics. By publishing the policy piece, entitled "Use of Force: the American Public and the Ethics of War", we reached a wider policy audience.

## **Policy Outreach Meetings**

By briefing policymakers about potential public support for and constraints against the use of force and the public interest in following the Laws of Armed Conflict and the principles of just war doctrine, we have encouraged more informed discussions about when military force should be used in realistic scenarios.

The work of this project was featured in three important policy outreach events. First, in March 2015, Scott Sagan presented a briefing, based on this survey research and earlier historical case study work, to Admiral Cecil Haney and his staff at the United States Strategic Command. Second, in April 2015, Scott Sagan delivered a well-attended talk, entitled "Atomic Aversion and Just War Principles: New Evidence on U.S. Public Opinion," at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., for Washington based academics and policymakers. Third, in September 2015, Scott Sagan was invited to present a special briefing to General Joseph Dunford, the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the Pentagon. He spoke about public opinion based on these surveys, and the need to take into account the U.S. 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and Negative Security Assurances in the context of the of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. General Dunford sent a letter to Scott Sagan after the briefing, in which he said: "Many thanks for meeting with me to discuss nuclear deterrence. I appreciate your insightful perspective on how our adversaries may view levels of conflict differently and how our use of certain phrases may not translate as intended. Your thoughts will help shape my future engagements and speech."

Finally, we note that this award did not include funding for outreach events. However, as outlined in the project milestones, Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino are scheduled to travel to India in December 2015, and hold academic seminars and policy outreach meetings on December 16-18, 2015, under the MacArthur grant that also supports this project.

## **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

The survey experiments have shed new light on the sources of the American public's willingness to support the use of military forces and the constraints imposed by the Laws of Armed Conflict and the principles of just war doctrine. We have discovered that there is only limited public support for following principles of non-combatant immunity, proportionality, and due care in both conventional weapons and nuclear weapons operations, and that significant portions of the U.S. public supports military options that arguably violate the Laws of Armed Conflict and just war principles. There is little evidence that the "nuclear taboo" has a strong constraining influence on the U.S. public.

We currently lack full evidence on whether the Indian public and elites hold similar views. We learned that translation difficulties and technical challenges of interviewing door to door in remote villages in India make internet surveys in English a preferred option, despite the results being more representative of elite opinion rather than broader Indian public opinion. We look forward to getting the Indian data soon and to presenting our findings in New Delhi in December 2015.

We thank the PASC funders for their support in producing this innovative, rigorous, and policy-relevant research. We are pleased that there has been such high level interest in our findings, as evidenced by the briefings to the senior military leaders of the United States. We look forward to continuing the analysis of the data, publishing the research, and conducting further policy briefings on U.S. public opinion and nuclear weapons in the coming year.