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Policy Memorandum: The Logic of Foreign Nuclear Deployments

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Last month marked the fiftieth anniversary of the most significant crisis of the nuclear age: the Cuban Missile Crisis. The U.S. detection of Soviet nuclear forces on the island of Cuba in October 1962 precipitated a tense thirteen day standoff between the two superpowers. The Soviets ultimately agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba in exchange for U.S. promises (1) not to invade the island and (2) remove nuclear-tipped Jupiter missiles from Turkey. Yet why did the Soviets place nuclear missiles in Cuba in the first place?

Senior U.S. officials were puzzled by this at the time. President John F. Kennedy openly wondered what the Soviets were thinking: “Well,” Kennedy said during a meeting with advisors on October 16, “it’s a [*expletive*] mystery to me.” Kennedy’s reaction raises a broader question: Why do countries station nuclear weapons on the territory of other states? The Cuban case may be the most famous nuclear deployment, but it is certainly not the only instance where nuclear powers have stationed atomic weaponry on the territory of another country.

To find out why countries forward-deploy nuclear weapons, Todd S. Sechser of the University of Virginia and I produced a new dataset on all foreign nuclear deployments from 1945 to 2000, drawing on declassified documents. Our data show that three different nuclear powers – Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States – deployed forces to twenty-two different countries during this period. This includes some well-known deployments, such as America’s stationing of nuclear weapons in some NATO countries, as well as some cases that are rarely discussed in the historical literature, such as Britain’s deployment to Cyprus or the Soviet Union’s deployment to Mongolia.

Using this new dataset, we employed statistical analysis to study why states deploy their nuclear weapons to some countries, but not others. We found that countries deploy nuclear forces abroad for two main reasons.

The first is to bolster extended deterrence by protecting allies and other strategically important countries. Indeed, allies are considerably more likely than nonallies to receive foreign nuclear bombs; having a shared enemy further increases the probability that two states will arrange a deployment to protect the host state from possible aggression.

To some, these results may seem obvious. However, alliances are not necessary for nuclear deployments to occur. In seven of the twenty-two cases in our dataset (32 percent), the nuclear power and the host country did not share a formal defense pact. For example, the United States stationed nuclear forces in Morocco and Spain – two countries with which it was not formally allied at the time the deployments occurred (Spain joined NATO after the nuclear forces were removed). Moreover, many protégés do not receive nuclear bombs from their patrons. Norway, a NATO ally, never hosted U.S. nuclear weapons, for instance, and neither did Australia or France. Our findings therefore are not preordained.

The second reason countries forward-deploy nuclear forces is to increase the “reach” of their arsenals. Stationing nuclear forces abroad could provide states with the capacity to strike targets in distant lands, a capability that they might otherwise lack. To improve its ability to strike the Soviet homeland, for example, the United States introduced nuclear weapons in Morocco in 1953. Britain similarly deployed nuclear forces to Southeast Asia beginning in the early 1960s

because it did not have the capacity to deliver nuclear forces to the region if they were launched from Europe.

Geographic considerations sometimes motivate states to forward-deploy nuclear forces even if their delivery systems already allow them to use nuclear weapons virtually anywhere in the world. Indeed, both the Soviet Union and the United States continued to forward-deploy nuclear forces well after they acquired intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). They did so, in part, because foreign deployments provided them with the capability to hit targets abroad more promptly (due to shorter flight times) and more accurately. This, they believed, facilitated their ability to punish the enemy in the event of war and potentially stymie invading forces.

Consistent with a power projection motive, our analysis shows that countries located far from nuclear states are more likely to host their bombs. Additionally, we find that nuclear states are more likely to deploy forces to countries that are located in close proximity to their enemies. States located near a nuclear power's adversaries make especially attractive hosts since their location enables the nuclear power to promptly hit targets in a rival's homeland in the event of war. Singapore was an attractive host for Britain, for example, because it was located relatively close to China.

Our analysis also shows that the power projection logic is less salient today than it was during the early Cold War period. The advent of ICBMs reduced the need to deploy nuclear bombs abroad: Nuclear powers were 90 percent less likely to station their forces in another country if they possessed ICBMs (compared to if they did not possess long range missiles). However, as

previously noted, this does not imply that foreign nuclear deployments became irrelevant once the Soviet Union and the United States acquired ICBMs. Our dataset shows that both superpowers introduced nuclear weapons in foreign lands after they already possessed long range missiles. And despite possessing the capacity to hit targets anywhere in the world from bases located in the homeland, the United States continues to station nuclear gravity bombs in five NATO countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey.

We do not find support for other alternative arguments – including the notion that states forward-deploy nuclear forces to promote nonproliferation. The basic idea here is that states deploy nuclear weapons to friendly nations so that they will be less likely to build independent nuclear arsenals. However, our analysis demonstrates that this is generally not a strong motive for stationing nuclear forces abroad. To be sure, in a handful of cases – including the U.S. deployment to South Korea – the presence of foreign bombs may have deterred nuclearization. Yet, on average, states that are at risk for building the bomb are no more likely than other countries to host foreign nuclear weapons.

What do we learn from our analysis? The results have some significant implications, one of which is that, when viewed through the lens of history, the Soviet Union’s nuclear deployment to Cuba is less puzzling than it might otherwise seem. Moscow sent nuclear missiles to Cuba partly to strengthen a friendly regime that was vulnerable to U.S. invasion and partly to enhance the Soviet Union’s ability to promptly hit targets in the United States with its nuclear arsenal. According to our analysis, similar motives influenced many of the twenty-two other foreign

nuclear deployments that have occurred to date – including the U.S. deployments to Italy, Taiwan, Turkey, and West Germany, which predated the Cuban Missile Crisis.