

5-14-2021

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Natasha McKamey
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Recommended Citation

McKamey, Natasha (2021) "Book Review of "The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age" by Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press," *International Journal of Nuclear Security*: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/ijns/vol7/iss1/6>

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Book Review

The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age

Lieber, Kier A. and Press, Daryl G.

Cornell University Press, 2020, 180 pages, ISBN 9781501749292 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781501749308 (epub), Price: \$29.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Natasha McKamey

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dr. Keir A. Lieber serves as an Associate Professor at Georgetown University in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Science. Lieber is the Director of the Center for Security Studies and Security Studies Program. Professor Lieber's area of focus includes nuclear weapons, deterrence, and strategy; technology and the causes of war; United States national security policy; and international relations theory.

Dr. Daryl G. Press serves as an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College and is Coordinator for the Dickey Postdoctoral Fellows Program. Press's area of focus is on national security policy in the United States, changing technology and warfare, and nuclear deterrence. Professor Press has consulted with the United States Department of Defense in the past and serves on the historical advisory committee for the U.S. State Department.

The Myth of Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age is co-written by Keir Lieber and Daryl Press. The authors assess what they refer to as the "central puzzle" of the nuclear age as it currently stands: "the intensity of competition in an era in which victory seemed impossible" (29). They analyze why geopolitical competition persists despite the deterrence developed by the creation and evolution of nuclear weapons. This book aims to solve the Nuclear Puzzle: "if nuclear weapons are such powerful instruments of deterrence then why do so many aspects of international competition in the nuclear age resemble those of the prenuclear era? Why do nuclear powers continue to fear rising powers, strive for superior weaponry, build entangling allies, and covet strategically advantageous territory? If nuclear-armed countries are fundamentally secure from attack, why don't they act like it?" (120).

The book comprises four chapters, aside from the introduction and conclusion. *The Myth of Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* focuses on why competition among states continues in the nuclear age. It claims to answer this puzzle with the concept of the nuclear stalemate when discussing the answer to the Nuclear Puzzle(s).

For those with little to no experience in or knowledge of the world of power politics, nuclear warfare, or nuclear powers, the authors largely succeed in walking readers through the concepts fairly well in the introductory chapters. The introductory chapter, "The Nuclear Puzzle," explains that terror and peace are defining characteristics of the nuclear age. This claim necessarily simplifies the associated features of this period. What characteristics could be more appropriate and essential in defining the capabilities of something with the potential to destroy civilization as we know it?

In the first chapter of the book, “Power Politics in the Nuclear Age,” Lieber and Press question why nuclear weapons have not transformed politics across the globe and alleviated the need or desire for competition among nuclear powers to attain power, allies, territory, and military superiority. The authors go on to insist that nuclear weapons are the “ultimate instruments of deterrence, rather than just the most potent tools of war” (11). This insistence validates the idea that nuclear weapons are the most potent tools of war, of course, but it is their potency which allows nuclear weapons to work so effectively as a deterrent to warfare. Lieber and Press attribute the destructive and deterring capabilities of the current nuclear era to the splitting of the atom at the “dawn of the nuclear era.” This is an important moment in history to include with respect to the evolution of nuclear weapons and how they are understood today. The book goes on to contrast war in the pre-nuclear and current nuclear eras – claiming that destruction of life and civilization cannot be the only or superior form of deterrence in the nuclear age because war has gone on for centuries, and life has been lost to great extents in the past. This claim allows a nice segue into the following chapter, “Getting to Stalemate: How Much is Enough.” Chapter two questions how much nuclear weapons capability a state must possess to be able to create a stalemate. Again, Lieber and Press do well by their readers who are not versed in nuclear politics or warfare and define and contextualize stalemate in the general sense but also with respect to their question: “how much nuclear capability must countries build to create stalemate” (31). The chapter is broken down into schools of thought which allow for understanding “how much” is necessary for deterrence; the authors’ first school of thought claims that the sheer existence of nuclear weapons and the idea of a potential threat is enough to serve as a deterring factor for nuclear warfare. The second school of thought is that the contemplation of nuclear warfare does not come from the probability of winning the war but from the focus on the probability of annihilation. The third school of thought claims that retaliation must be assured for deterrence to prevail. However, the authors seem to counter these schools of thought with the assertion that an arsenal with minimal weapons may not suffice as a deterrent for a well-endowed nuclear power.

“Escaping Stalemate: The New Era of Counterforce” is the third chapter of *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age*, where Lieber and Press suggest that stalemate is reversible and engagement in military competition may prevail, which, according to the authors, means that countries will not or cannot relax and move away from pre-nuclear-era tactics and strategies. This chapter includes the use of graphs, charts, and maps to assist in the reader’s understanding that technology and nuclear weapons will continue to develop with greater accuracy than that of now. Therefore, “counterforcing” seems to call for an arms race in technology and the increased production of nuclear weapons – all of which makes sense, especially when you consider the previous chapters’ suggestions that stalemate serves as a deterrent, but the definition of “how much” nuclear weapons are necessary calls for the suggestion of an arms race.

The final chapter and the book’s conclusion respectively, “Deterrence under Stalemate: Conventional War and Nuclear Escalation” and “Solving the Nuclear Puzzle,” close the book fittingly. The final chapter suggests that the world of nuclear warfare will only continue to grow as time goes on; it states that nuclear revolution has yet to occur and does not occur because the formation, use, and holding of nuclear weapons has not yet ended building alliances between countries and the security (or sense of) that is brought through alliances. Lieber and Press conclude the book with the understanding that “nuclear deterrence is serious

business... if a country is going to acquire nuclear weapons, it will need enough of them to guarantee stalemate" (130).

The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age may have an expansive readership because of the topic at hand as well as the way in which it was written. The authors create a baseline for readers to connect with the material throughout the book. For example, they use the Cold War as a great and repeated example of the relationship between allies and powers as well as a reflection of the potential arms race at hand in the nuclear era. By using the Cold War, readers have a well-known and historical period to refer to in each section.

This work is a thorough and thought-provoking piece that questions the idea that a nuclear revolution could exist. Each part of the book builds onto the next. Lieber and Press present their work and findings in a way that does not require readers to be experts of power politics nor experts of the politics of nuclear weapons, though some knowledge of both areas is beneficial prior to reading the book.