

## Undergraduate Research Assistantship Report 2024

Embarking on a research project often begins with a clear and defined destination in mind. However, every researcher will eventually come to understand that the path to a new discovery or insight is rarely a straight line. My experience as a research assistant has taught me this very lesson.

Over the past year, I had the enviable opportunity to work with Dr. Jeff Legro on his project exploring the implications of the nuclear weapon revolution. As nuclear weapons proliferated, many explored the security impacts of such devastating weapons, with some arguing that it had fundamentally altered the strategic calculus of states and their leaders, while others proposed that the great power competition had still simply continued as it always had. However, the important political and economic dimensions and consequences of nuclear weapons were understudied and often overlooked. While I assisted with the qualitative portion of the research, another research assistant, Evelyne, assisted with the more quantitative approaches.

During the process, Dr. Legro and I discovered an interesting trend somewhat distinct from the objective of our study – that despite the rhetoric and position that leaders had on nuclear weapons prior to ascending to their positions, ranging from using them as weapons on the battlefield to an outright rejection of their use ever, almost all would eventually arrive at a point where nuclear weapons were solely viable as a tool for deterrence. Following that discovery, while Evelyne continued to work on the initial project, Dr. Legro began a separate project with me – to uncover whether this trend held true for the significant Keepers of the Button (KOBs), those that held the responsibility for nuclear launch, as well as the sources of learning that brought them within this box of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

### **Methods**

Due to the nature of the new project that we were pursuing, much of the research was qualitative in nature. My research comprised of two separate stages.

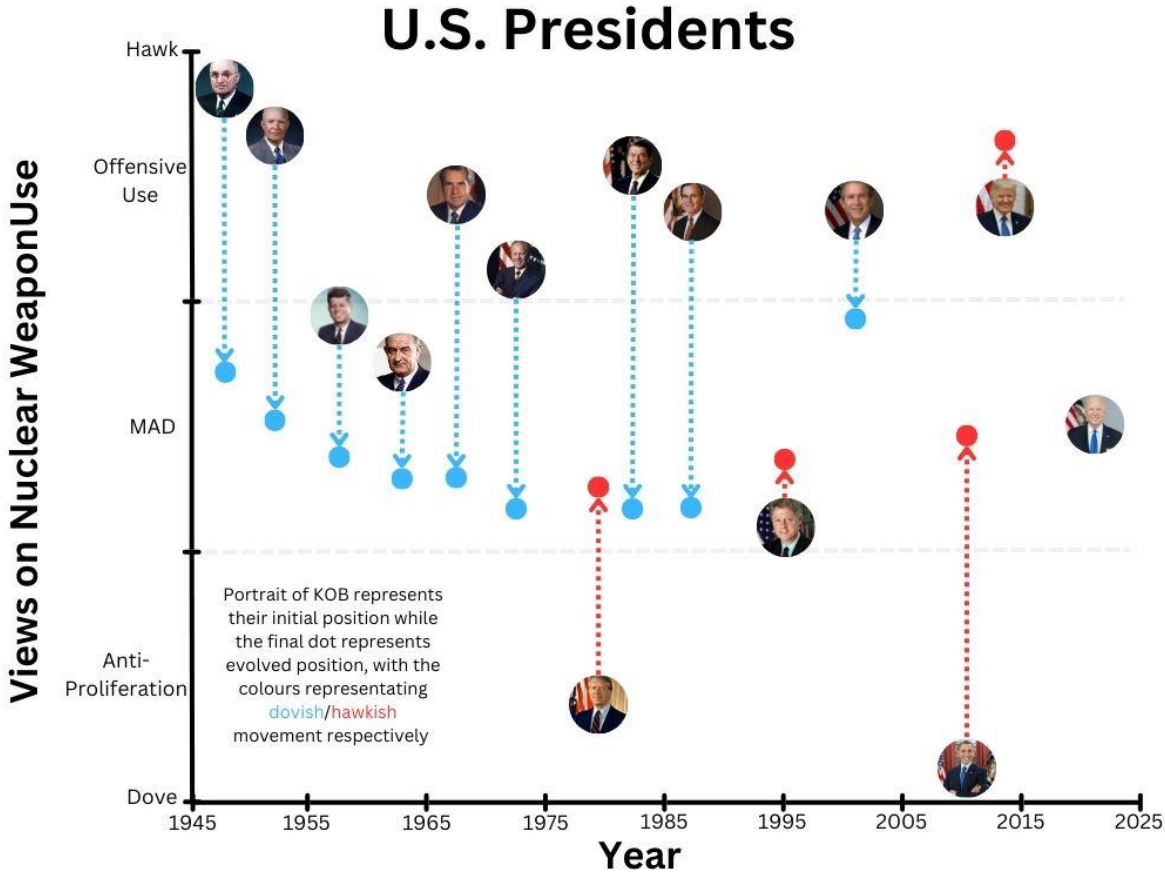
The first stage consisted of determining a leader's initial position on nuclear weapon use, and its subsequent evolution as the leader went through his term. I began from the nuclear bomb's inception, and analysed every leader in the seven decades since, from Truman to Biden for the USA, and used similar timeframes for Soviet/Russian leaders. Significant British, French and Chinese leaders were also investigated. Doing a literature review on the existing scholarship on nuclear policies and leaders provided a foundation on which to build upon. However, as we were attempting to determine an individual's personal views on nuclear

weapons, which were influenced by their personalities, backgrounds and ideologies and not simply the policy outcomes, I had to expand to analyses of primary sources. Among many sources, these included letters, meeting minutes, memos, and even their university dissertations. We used the qualitative data to code a continuum of nuclear views ranging from the hawkish viewpoint that was open to using nuclear weapons offensively, to the dovish viewpoint that were for non-use and abolition. Placing leaders on that continuum, we mapped out the evolution of their views over time.

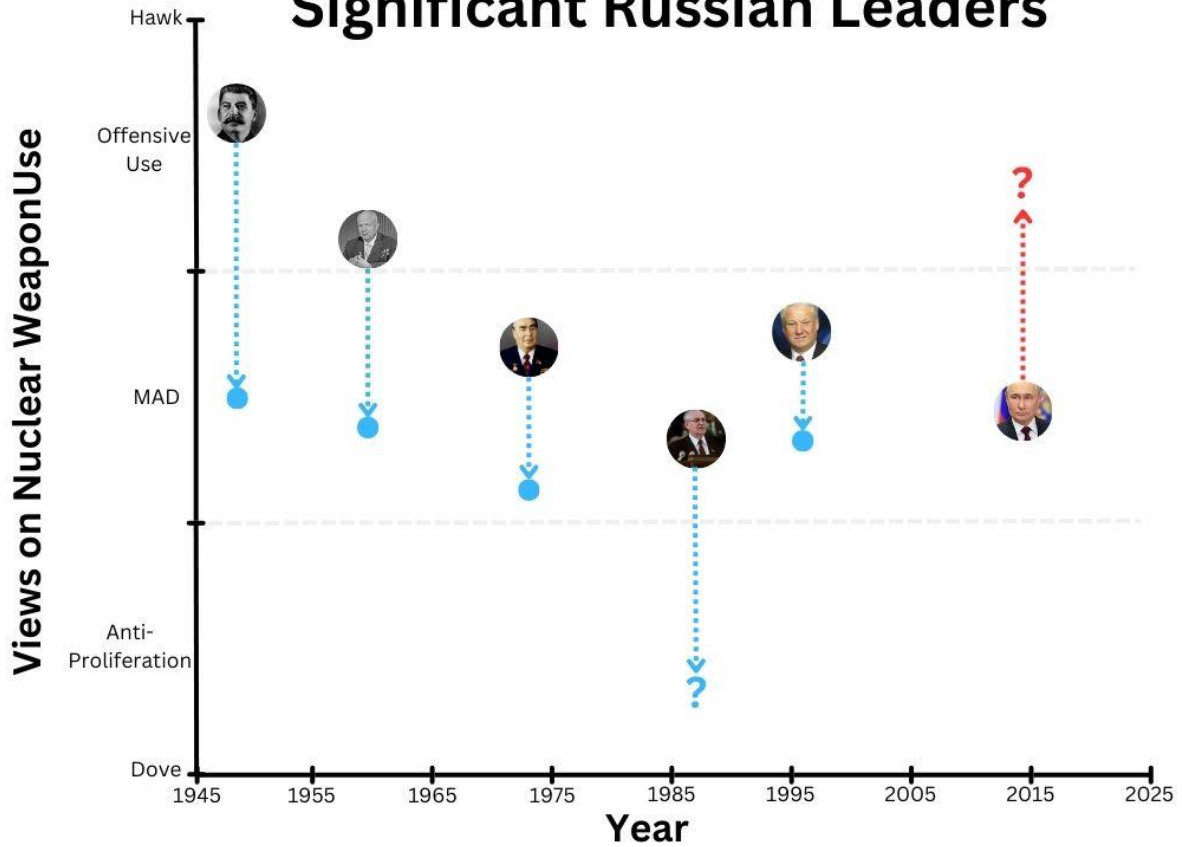
Next, we dove further into the archives to uncover sources of this evolution, that is, the triggers that caused these leaders to change their perspectives. The challenge at this stage was to uncover clear causal links, instead of simply correlated events. Here, on top of the previously mentioned sources, first-hand accounts of leaders’ reactions to specific nuclear policies and meetings, and their memoirs were enlightening. Apart from archives, case study analysis of specific leaders was also very helpful. Diving deep into specific key events and the relevant leaders allowed us to further the *how* and *why*.

**Findings**

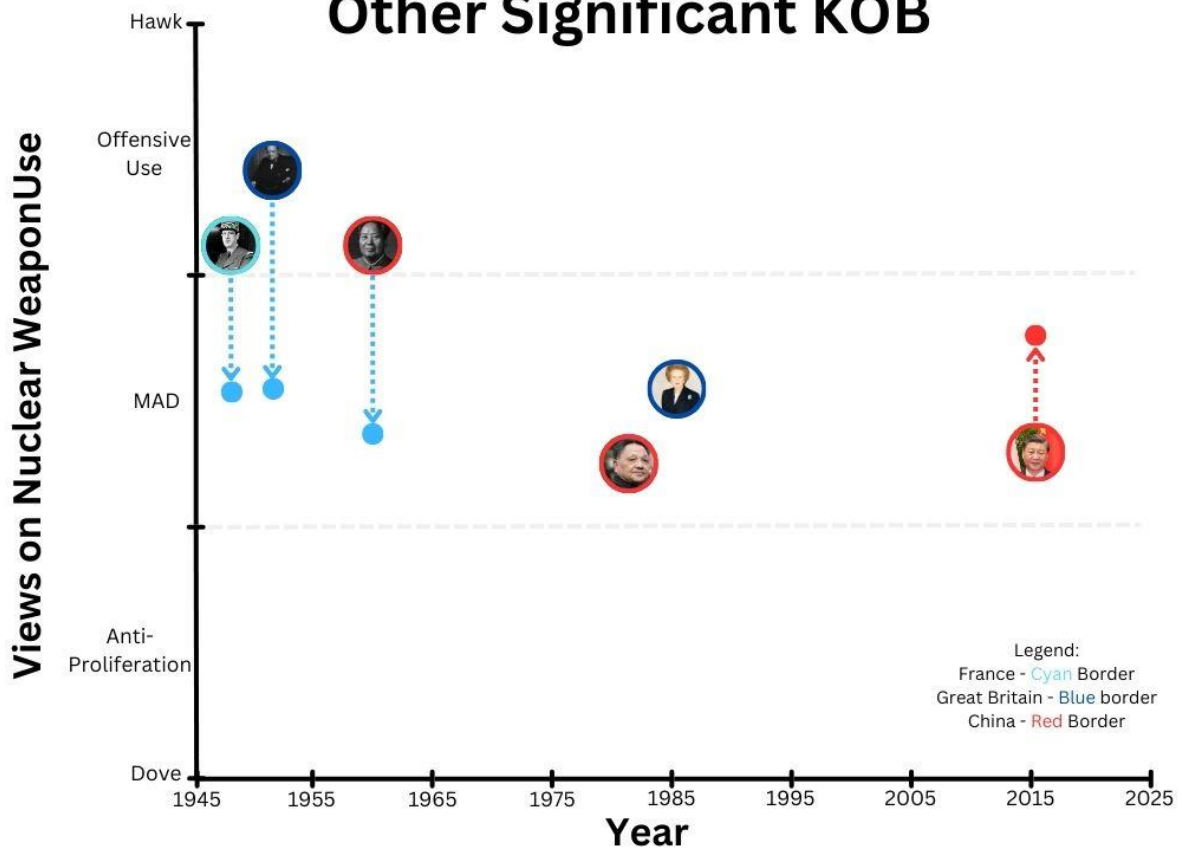
Below, I have attached graphs summarising the evolution of nuclear viewpoints.



## Significant Russian Leaders



## Other Significant KOB



We found that apart from a few exceptions, KOBs would eventually drift into a “MAD box”, that is, a view of nuclear weapons as solely useful as a strategic deterrent. Despite the widely varying backgrounds and experiences of the leaders, and whether they were initially hawkish or dovish, most ended accepting the premise of MAD, despite what some of their public rhetoric may suggest. Many also attempted to escape the “MAD box” through development of new technology, or advocating for arms reductions or abolition, but we find that such attempts failed due to socializing experiences that solidified the premise of MAD. Diving into case studies of specific leaders, we find that although many of these socializing experiences may have been unique to the time, place, and administration of the respective leaders, we could categorize these different experiences into distinct baskets. These socializing experiences include nuclear tests and use, internal briefings, crises, prior experience with other nuclear leaders, strategic interactions with other nuclear states, as well as diplomatic interactions.

## **Implications**

This study is especially important today, with concerns of nuclear war materializing once again. While Putin is issuing regular, veiled threats of using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, China is pursuing a seemingly unprecedented expansion of their nuclear arsenal in the modern era and Trump, a presidential hopeful once again, had in his previous term nonchalantly asserted the possibility of nuclear weapon use for offense or coercion. This study offers valuable insights into the methods and sources of nuclear learning in leaders, providing policy-makers and KOBs alike a suite of tools to use to manage strategic decisions that could quite possibly, literally, transform the world.

## **Reflection**

Often during the course of research, one may find themselves singularly focused on the pursuit of the defined objective. However, you must never close yourself to the opportunity of finding something entirely different. Discovering an intriguing fact or pattern can pivot the focus of a project, ultimately leading to separate, but very compelling and interesting revelations. For me, understanding this evolving nature of research has been the greatest boon to my academic journey, not only improving the quality of my work, but also enhancing my critical thinking skills and flexibility.

*“In the fields of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind.” ~Louis Pasteur*