Since the dawn of the nuclear age, the United States has pursued nuclear non-proliferation policies against its enemies and allies alike. Even nuclear-armed allies could reduce the US leverage over its allies and drag superpowers into a nuclear conflict. If the core objective of Washington since 1945 has been to prevent its allies from developing nuclear weapons, then what might account for variation in the US non-proliferation policies? Why did the United States pursue coercive policies to halt nuclear weapons programs of certain vulnerable allies, but far more accommodating strategies towards the nuclear ambitions of other equally strategically vulnerable allies? Why did the United States embrace accommodative policies for allies like Israel and Pakistan for their nuclear weapons program while adopting coercive policies to prevent allies such as South Korea and Taiwan from developing nuclear weapons? What explains this variation? Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Associate Professor of Political Science at Tufts University, accounts this variation by using neo-classical realism approach in his book *Defending Frenemies: Alliance Politics and Nuclear Non-proliferation in US Foreign Policy*. In this book, Taliaferro argues that the competing demands of the Cold War realpolitik explain the varied outcomes in the US non-proliferation policies against frenemies—a state having bilateral defence relationship with the United States despite the divergent security and political interests. He demonstrates how neo-classical realist theory is well-positioned to explain the inconsistent US non-proliferation policies towards frenemies like Israel, Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Taliaferro tests several theories (nuclear domino theory, security commitment theory and credible sanctions theory) and finds that their tunnel vision concerning non-proliferation policies leads to their failure to explain the variation in Washington’s tolerance of nuclear weapon procurement efforts. Instead, Taliaferro relies on neo-classical realism’s ability to explain the non-proliferation policies into a wider foreign policy context. He makes a convincing case that when US policy-makers perceive an unfavourable regional distribution of power and short time-horizon threats, they pursue accommodative non-proliferation policies by giving priority to security challenges. When the regional balance-of-power
is favourable, the time-horizon is long and domestic hurdles are low, the policy-makers tend to take a hard-line approach to stop the proliferation. In the case of high domestic hurdles, the US leaders employ a hybrid strategy that ‘combines elements of coercion and accommodation’ (p. 14). The book successfully tests these hypotheses on frenemies with one major anomaly. From 1975 to 1976, the Ford administration adopted an accommodative non-proliferation strategy towards Pakistan despite the existence of regional stability and no imminent security threat.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic and the second chapter explains the theoretical framework based on neo-classical realism. The succeeding chapters test hypothesis against four frenemies. Chapter 3 compares the strategies employed by the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon Administrations towards Israel. The policies of the Ford, Carter and Reagan Administrations to thwart the nuclear developments of Pakistan are examined in Chapter 4. Chapters 5 and 6 assess the strategies of the Nixon, Ford and Carter Administrations to halt the nuclear developments of South Korea and Taiwan. The final chapter summarises the results of the case studies, discusses the theoretical implications and identifies the avenues for future research.

The theoretical framework that Taliaferro develops is based on neo-classical realism which ‘assumes that domestic-level intervening variables condition how states respond to international stimuli’ (p. 13). Therefore, Congressional approval or disapproval is an intervening variable that determines US policies (the dependent variable) in response to a frenemy state’s initiation of a nuclear program, power distribution and the time-horizon of threats (independent variables). The theory does not purport to explain what strategies employed by the US policy-makers are best at halting nuclear weapons program among the frenemies nor it sets out to describe why these states embarked upon nuclear weapons program. Rather, it simply explains the ‘variation in the types of coercive diplomacy and inducements the United States pursued toward them’ (p. 27).

The case study chapters are comprehensive with details of events that forced the US executives to shift policies from coercive to accommodative or hybrid strategies. Theses chapters provide insights of how policy-makers exercise their powers to employ threats and inducements, wield leverage in negotiations, assess intelligence reports, calculate the cost–benefit ratio, overcome domestic hurdles and formulate policies that achieve their objectives in a best possible way in given circumstances. The case studies examine the United States’ confrontation with the frenemies in the Cold War period spanning from 1961 to 1990. Each chapter delineates the power distribution, regional threats perceived by the successive US Presidents and senior officials, and in case of high domestic hurdles how ‘each administration needed to overcome sometimes skewed the type of strategies ultimately pursued toward the ally’ (p. 35).

Defending Frenemies makes two important contributions to the existing literature. The first contribution is the theoretical explanation—based on neo-classical realism’s assumption of power distribution, threat perception and domestic hurdles—of variations in the types of non-proliferation strategies that the United States pursued toward allies in different regions. The second contribution is to highlight the limits of the United States’ leverage in the case of
nuclear proliferation. Each US administration considers nuclear proliferation a threat for American interests and international stability but came to realise that it could not stop Israel’s and Pakistan’s nuclear programs and pursued policies to delay these programs. The non-proliferation literature also tends to label the termination of the South Koreans and Taiwanese nuclear programs as easy tasks for the United States. The book, however, illustrates that it was not an easy matter and required consistent efforts to halt these nuclear programs.

The book focuses on the Cold War period in explaining why the US non-proliferation policies varied over time and across the region, but it has current policy relevance. Today, Russia and China are posing serious challenges to US hegemony in various regions. The book suggests that the prime objective of Washington should be to contain Moscow in Europe and the Middle Eastern regions, and China in East Asia and Southeast Asian regions. The current proliferation threats are from North Korea and Iran which are not frenemy states, but US policy-makers ought to approach these two states with grand strategic objective (averting containment failure) in mind. Taliaferro also provides policy guidelines on how to deal with US allies not covered by American extended deterrence should they pursue nuclear weapons in a changed security environment.

Defending Frenemies provides an array of insights and perspectives on contradictory non-proliferation policies pursued by the United States towards its allies. However, it does not discuss in detail how these allies tried to shape US policy in their strategic interests by mobilising supporters in the United States such as lobbyists and diaspora communities. It is also hard to know how policymakers ‘perceive’ and make subjective assessments of power distribution and the time-horizon of regional threat. For example, the Trump administration reversed the Obama administration’s accommodative policy and adopted a coercive non-proliferation strategy towards Iran despite no significant change in the power distribution and regional threat. Moreover, Taliaferro acknowledges that neo-classical realism explains the variation of US non-proliferation policies towards frenemies except one case of Pakistan where the Ford administration adopted accommodative policies and the theory expects coercive strategies due to favourable balance-of-power and no regional threat.

Despite this one oversight, Taliaferro does an excellent job in developing his theory to prove that neo-classical realism provides the most compelling explanation of the variation of US non-proliferation policies in different regions. Defending Frenemies is an important contribution in the literature by placing non-proliferation policies in a wider foreign policy context. This book will be of significant interest to IR scholars, policy-makers and audience interested in history.

**ORCID iD**

Saira Bano  
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5501-7518

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*Saira Bano*  
*Department of Economics, Justice and Policy Studies  
Mount Royal University, Canada  
E-mail: sbano@mtroyal.ca*