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Junior Qual Proposal

The Cold War is over, but as recent events with Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and elsewhere have made clear, nuclear weapons remain a central issue in international politics. The US maintains roughly 10,000 warheads, and Russia 8,600, compared to approximately 30,000 each in the 1970s. The UK and France have decreased their arsenals over the past decade, while China has remained relatively stable since the mid-1980s. Smaller nuclear states such as Israel, India and Pakistan continue to grow their arsenals, though at rates that seem below their maximum potential.

Given this kind of data, I am interested in evaluating the literature on the determining factors in the size of nuclear arsenals. Some of the explanations include military needs (general or mission-specific), organizational reasons (bureaucratic inertia, budget maximization), absolute and relative numbers compared to potential adversaries, technical obstacles (lack of fissile material), and political calculation (looking strong to domestic constituents or adversaries). Given this diversity of opinion, I would like to see which explanations are dominant in the literature and show the strongest evidence.

The general literature is rather large, so it will likely become necessary to narrow the focus to particular nations. The first potential problem in this approach is the strict secrecy of the issue for most states. While arsenal size can be estimated for China, Israel, etc, there are no hard numbers available. With frequent discussions of the rising superpower status and potential threat of China, I would like to look at that specific literature in more detail, but the lack of information could be an obstacle. India and Pakistan have less mysterious arsenals, which could provide a useful way to narrow my

topic. The challenge in finalizing the topic will be to select something manageable that still has diversity of academic opinions, but without so much secrecy that specific claims cannot be evaluated to some degree.

The topic is clearly relevant to political science because of the impact on international relations. The nuclear arms race of the Cold War kept the whole world on edge, while significant conflicts remain between India and Pakistan. The UK recently debated reducing their arsenal while Iran and North Korea threaten to disrupt the established system. A better understanding of the factors that lead a state to increase or decrease arsenal size could potentially reduce nuclear tensions and arsenals, reinvigorating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and improving homes for arms control and disarmament.