

## Variation in Global Responses to Rogue States

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### Abstract

Rogue states have been a contentious topic among scholars, yet in their simplest form, they can be defined as aggressive states or governments that aim to disrupt the balance of power by acquiring weapons of mass destruction and sponsoring international terrorism. At the same time, the term's ambiguity and lack of objectivity have been at the forefront of scholarship and debate, with many scholars –namely Caprioli and Trumbore– noting the lack of consistent criteria and inconsistent usage of the term. Hence, both the significance and analytical utility of the label have faced much scrutiny and criticism, especially as scholars contend that “rogue states” are unusually aggressive or prone to conflict is untrue; empirical evidence suggests that the behavior of alleged “rogue states” does not systemically differ from that of other states (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). In this sense, when considering the “Rogue State” label's origins in U.S. foreign policy, the term, rather than as a neutral reflection of objective threat, serves to construct certain “norm-violating” states as villains to mobilize preemptive, politicized measures (Homolar, 2011). Therefore, this paper argues that variation in global responses to so-called rogue states is but a residual anomaly of the label's conceptual precariousness and emergence from U.S. foreign policy language and calculated rhetoric. Consequently, responses such as diplomacy, intervention, and sanctions reflect the interaction between conflicting narratives, which support the conclusion that variation in response to rogue states is an inherent feature of the term itself.

**Keywords:** rogue states, U.S. foreign policy discourse, constructivism (international relations), political rhetoric and labeling, economic sanctions, coercive diplomacy, post-Cold War security policy, ideology in international relations

### 1. Introduction

The term “rogue state” is far from an objective analytical category; rather, it is a political construct historically embedded



within the discourse and ideology of American foreign policy. Robert Litwak traces the term's emergence to the post-Cold War era, when the Pentagon sought a quest for a new post-Cold War mission that would redefine threats after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Litwak, 2001). In the face of policymakers and media outlets routinely using the term to describe aggressive, abnormal states, critics still question the category's precision and validity (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Amidst this debate, the label "rogue state" is best understood as a shifting, unilateral American political concept without a foundation in international law (Buchwald, 2019). In fact, the term "rogue state" is a profoundly unsettled concept in international law. Different governments have habitually had divergent perspectives on what constitutes a "rogue state," and which states meet the criteria (Buchwald, 2019). Commonly cited "rogue states" include North Korea, Iran, Cuba, and Libya; Libya is no longer classified as a "rogue state" (Schwartz, 2007; The Rogue State Doctrine and National Missile Defense on JSTOR, n.d) Thus, in the absence of a codified set of criteria for what a "rogue state" is, the label is a rhetorical tool to legitimize certain American foreign policy decisions, rather than a precise scholarly concept.

This definitional ambiguity poses a significant problem for theory and practice in international relations. Absent consensus on which behaviors, capabilities, and normative violations render a state "rogue," much research and scholarship conflate heterogeneous regimes under a single category or heading. This conflation renders it impossible to know which "rogue" states are truly "rogue" and that fundamentally hinders any effort to draw a substantial conclusion. Moreover, considering recent empirical evidence, the notion that so-called "rogue states" are uniquely deviant is inconsistent with the evidence, which only further diminishes the analytical utility of the term (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005).

The U.S. State Department's first publication of the annual list of states that sponsored terrorism contributed to the idea that certain regimes were uniquely anomalous and threatening (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Existing research frequently notes three recurring ideas that arose from the publication: facilitation of terrorism, illicit weapons of mass destruction (WMD) acquisition, and opposition to dominant power and ideologies (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Likewise, early commentary in the Washington Post Editorial on Libya's sponsorship of terrorism repeatedly emphasized Qaddafi's sponsorship of terrorism as the locus of Libya's threat. This marked state-led terrorism as a unique, distinct behavior. Such continuous framing of Libya's state-sponsored terrorism set a precedent that facilitation of terrorism was a central indicator of "rogue" statehood in American discourse (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Therefore, the United States was allowed to invoke numerous tools –military strikes, unilateral and multilateral economic sanctions, criminal prosecutions –to "change" Libya's dangerous behavior (Schwartz, 2007).

Over time, the label expanded to encompass states seeking WMD and missile delivery systems, which anchored WMD proliferation as a key marker of a "rogue" statehood. Litwak, among other scholars, examined the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy and missile-defense debates and concluded that "rogue states armed with WMD" were framed as the main post-Cold War threat (The New Calculus of Pre-Emption | Wilson Center, 2011). Thus, in the immediate post-Cold War period, academic analysts portrayed isolated regimes as potential proliferators, which reinforced the link between isolation, terrorism, and WMD acquisition.

These fears and concerns of "rogue state" proliferation and aggression were then intensified and amplified when American officials explicitly identified certain regimes as central threats to national security. For instance, former Secretary of State James Baker, during his 1989 Senate remarks, stressed the dangers posed by ballistic missiles and chemical warheads that had fallen into the hands of aggressive, terrorism supporting governments (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). As a result, the supposed threat of "rogue states" drove U.S. foreign policy and was used as an important justification in numerous policy



decisions. Analysis on U.S. strategy in the 1990s notes that the Pentagon's two-war doctrine and plans for military force were justified on the grounds that "rogue states" such as Iraq, Iran, Libya, and North Korea were dangerously aggressive (Zoubir, 2002). This logic was consistent with the many arguments for maintaining high defense spending and advanced weapons systems. Senator John Tower, for example, justified the continual investment in the B-2 stealth bomber by referencing certain "rogue regimes" having acquired sophisticated air defenses and state-of-the-art weapons (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Building on this, he claimed that the B-2 stealth bomber was crucial to countering the unpredictable nature of "rogue states." At the close of the 20th century, these attributes, although never fully agreed upon, became de-facto prerequisites for classifying rogue states.

Therefore, this paper utilizes the contested nature of the term to address the question: why is there variation in global responses to so-called "rogue states?" It first argues that the term "rogue state" is ambiguously and politically constructed, tracing its emergence to U.S. discourse and rhetoric. Second, this paper examines how policymakers have used the term, focusing on the significance of narrative, "language games," and perceived patterns of behavior for states such as Iraq and North Korea. Moreover, this paper analyzes the responses of U.S. allies and other major powers and how they reinterpret or reject the "rogue state" label. Finally, this paper assesses the literature that demonstrates the implications for understanding why global responses vary.

## 2. Politicization and Ambiguity of the Rogue State Label

The term "rogue state" became ubiquitous in U.S. policy discourse during the Clinton Administration and was continued during the Bush Administration. In the 2002 National Security Strategy, George W. Bush identified so-called rogue states as the "gravest" threat to American national security, labeling North Korea, Iraq, and Iran major threats requiring preemptive and anticipatory action (Homolar, 2011). Concurrently, scholars such as Litwak emphasized that the term originated as a unilateral American political tool that functioned primarily as a changing U.S. foreign policy lexicon (Litwak, 2001). Within this context, due to the label growing out of American rhetoric instead of a multilateral framework, its meaning remained extremely fluid and dependent upon American rhetorical needs.

The 2002 National Security Strategy marked a broader shift in American policy from a containment approach to one that legitimized unilateral military intervention and structured policy as more assertive and proactive towards states deemed "rogue." In the aftermath of this shift, arms controls and nonproliferation documents repeatedly stressed efforts to prevent the leakage of WMD materials and missile technologies to "rogue" regimes, casting them as the primary proliferation concern (O'Reilly, 2007). Accordingly, subsequent missile defense and military initiatives were likewise justified as the necessary course of action to sustain restrictions on rogue state weapons development and deployment (O'Reilly, 2007). Yet this agenda was entirely reliant on a term whose attributes remained ill-defined; U.S. officials, in the years following, treated "rogue states" as the epicenter of threat amid extensive debate and opposition.

Nevertheless, many analysts assert that the term functioned to fill a conceptual gap in American security strategy and remained skeptical that the regimes identified as rogue truly constituted a coherent category. When observing states such as North Korea and Cuba, scholars suggested the dangers they posed were exaggerated into hyperbolic, alarmist terms (Gordy & Lee, 2009). In this sense, the "rogue state" rubric became a tool for controlling narratives and further legitimizing unilateral American policy initiatives and interests (Gordy & Lee, 2009). These analyses exemplify that this rhetoric underwrote the foundation for a broad array of policy decisions. Without transparent criteria, the politically charged



attributes of the label revealed an overall lack of precision and objectivity (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005).

### **The Rogue State Label in Practice**

Former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake was among those who argued that the United States possessed the responsibility to neutralize, contain, and develop so-called “rogue states” into more constructive members of the international community (Caprioli & Trumbore, 2005). Over time, this way of thinking settled into American discourse, creating a strategic mechanism for the way North Korea and Iraq were treated in U.S. policy. Both countries were portrayed as dangerous outliers whose ambitions and defiance necessitated unique, targeted measures. Yet the stark contrast between war with Iraq and diplomacy in North Korea served as evidence that the “rogue state” rubric rarely reflected material threat, as regimes labeled in a similar appellation prompted notably different policy responses. This contrast demonstrates another example that the “rogue state” label failed to generate consistent, uniform policy responses; rather, responses are channeled through historical narratives, language-games, and friend-enemy distinctions that render a “rogue” as manageable through either diplomacy or military action.

In response to the North Korean nuclear program, the United States dispatched the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs to Pyongyang to pursue diplomatic engagement and offer benefits in exchange for reductions, even as it sought authorization to use military force against Iraq. Even after North Korea’s secret nuclear program to develop enriched uranium weapons was exposed, the Bush administration persisted with diplomacy and negotiation to resolve the conflict, sending numerous diplomats to confer with “friends and allies” (Howard, 2004). Such language demonstrates the U.S. intention to handle the DPRK problem multilaterally. By contrast, despite Iraq’s inability at that time to produce enough weapons-grade material to make a deliverable nuclear weapon, the United States still pursued harsher unilateral measures that culminated in war (Howard, 2004). It is important to note that North Korea, at this time, had already demonstrated its greater nuclear and military capability, which included its capacity to produce dozens of nuclear bombs (Nikitin, n.d.). Because North Korea, otherwise known as the more materially threatening state, was handled through diplomacy while Iraq was invaded, U.S. responses were driven less by actual threat levels and more by institutional precedent, diplomatic “language-games,” and the political utility of identifying enemies as suitable objects of force.

Peter Howard asserts that neither realism nor norm-focused constructivism can fully account for this divergence since both would predict the more threatening state to attract a more forceful balancing response (Howard, 2004). He instead emphasizes a language-based constructivist approach that epitomizes how entrenched diplomatic practices function as a game of negotiation, which limits the perceived many of responses and renders large-scale military action against North Korea unthinkable (Howard, 2004). Although North Korea’s nuclear capabilities in 2002 were more prominent than Iraq’s, Howard delineates that the varying responses were due to the different narratives and institutional habits that had accumulated in each relationship. (Howard, 2004). U.S. dealings with Iraq were long associated with long-standing patterns of confrontation and imposition dating back to the 1991 Gulf War, so Iraq had already been constructed as an appropriate target for military operations (Howard, 2004). Conversely, North Korea was met with diplomacy on account of routine interactions centered on crisis management and bargaining that was embedded in cooperative frameworks (Howard, 2004). Taken together, these dynamics illustrate a distinct constructivist perspective: material circumstances and objective threat are not enough to fully account for variation in policy responses; they are dependent upon previous and current “language-games” and institutional precedents that tell decision-makers what responses are legitimate and within the scope of the imaginable. More generally, the political implications of a “rogue state” are mediated by diplomatic practice



and discussion, rather than being solely determined by capability and peril (Howard, 2004).

Another theoretical framework that helps interpret these dynamics is Carl Schmitt's concept of the friend-enemy distinction. Although Schmitt never used the contemporary term "rogue state," his theory speaks directly to the conceptual foundations of the label to explain the construction of certain states as "enemies" that often justifies harsh or unforeseen responses to "rogue states." He argues that an enemy is whoever represents some existential threat to a particular political collectivity, and that once an actor is categorized as an enemy, rules are held in abeyance. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt details how criminalization of the hostis—otherwise known as a recognized enemy with political standing—legitimizes an "immensely intensified and enlarged antagonism" (Yamato, 2020). Given this premise, the "rogue state" label functions in a similar manner; labeling a state as "rogue" is an act of criminalization that situates the state outside the boundaries of diplomacy. Once a state is outside the boundaries, sanctions, isolation, and military force are seen as necessary and warranted. This boundary, however, lies not in material or measurable capabilities but in decisions about who counts as a legitimate partner and who is cast as an enemy. In this sense, the term "rogue state" is less as an objective describer of behavior and more as a friend-enemy marker that allows dominant states to depict certain regimes as irrational outliers and authorize sanctions, isolation, or even war as defensive acts against an enemy (Howard, 2004). It is important to note, however, that when a state attempts to universalize its own friend-enemy distinction, it does not always produce consensus. Different states will have their own friend-enemy distinctions, which is among the reasons why there is frequent variation in responses to "rogue states."

In fact, this tension can deepen when the friend-enemy distinction is rooted not just in material capability and threat, but in ideological dissonance. States like Cuba and North Korea may be deemed as "rogue" simply because their ongoing survival and rhetorical defiance of liberal international norms are perceived by the United States as dangerous to the international community. (Gordy & Lee, 2009). Because Cuba and North Korea refuse to adopt the dominant free market and liberal narrative, American claims to universality and progress are complicated (Gordy & Lee, 2009). So, they are constructed by the U.S. as enemies that warrant strong feelings of confrontation and exclusion, because their continued survival defies and unsettles American universalist claims and rhetoric. However, because the degree of perceived ideological threat differs, American responses to different "rogue states" often vary.

### 3. Beyond the United States

While the United States used the "rogue state" label as a central part of its post-Cold War strategy, other countries have been far more hesitant in embracing the term— they often prefer legal and treaty-based terms. Routinely, American attempts to push the "rogue state" rubric are met with skepticism, criticism, and hesitation—notably among states that regard the label as arbitrary and politically charged. This is often attributed to the term being used to describe a set of adversaries to the United States, rather than to a clearly specified behavior threshold that has been agreed upon. Hence, the term serves more as a contingent political categorization than quantifiable metrics for which a "rogue state" may be identified.

Despite U.S. foreign policy supremacy, many of America's closest allies historically have been reluctant to embrace the term, for outside of American circles, the label is frequently rejected, with much academic literature questioning the validity and utility of the term (Gordy & Lee, 2009). Even if many American allies endorse nonproliferation in principle, they still frequently resist American strategies of intervention, especially when they lack international authorization (Caprioli &



Trumbore, 2005). This reluctance was clear when key allies failed to support or align with American military action during the 1998 Iraq crisis, despite the persistent portrayals of Iraq as an archetypal “rogue state” (Kim & Hundt, 2011). These skepticisms were subsequently reinforced with many studies at the time indicating that so-called “rogue states” did not behave in ways that were fundamentally divergent from other authoritarian states (Klare, 1998).

Christopher Bluth argues that American efforts to isolate “rogue states” have been persistently undermined by the interests of other major powers (Bluth, 2017). North Korea, for example, has survived through exploiting the willingness of states like China to provide continuous diplomatic and economic support (Bluth, 2017). Chinese companies have even assisted Pyongyang in bypassing international scrutiny and allowing the regime to secure funding and technologies related to its nuclear and missile initiatives (China’s Facilitation of Sanctions and Export Control Evasion, n.d.). The ultimate effectiveness of the American sanctions and isolation is then eroded when states—chiefly Russia and China—fail to align and support U.S. rhetoric and policy fully (Bluth, 2017). For instance, both Russia and China have used their Security Council veto power to block and lessen penalties against North Korean sanctions violations (Cha & Kim, 2024). However, the discrepancies between American rhetoric and diverging interests are not limited to states like Russia and China; rather, they reflect the wider reluctance to align with American terminology. In much literature, the term is analytically indeterminate, and the label, along with more dramatic formulations such as the “axis of evil,” was met with significant resistance among traditional U.S. allies within the European Union (Bluth, 2017). Former French Ambassador Eric Rouleau contended that due to there being no French equivalent for the “rogue state label,” the states did not exist as a legitimate category within French political vocabulary (Saunders, 2006). His contentions capture and reflect the sweeping European reluctance and rejection of the label.

During public statements and testimonies, many American officials even hinted at this disparity between American rhetoric and allied acumen. Stuart Eizenstat, during his congressional testimony, expressed frustration that allied governments did not share America’s sense of urgency regarding “rogue states” (Saunders, 2006). Even as the U.S. pushed to form a coalition to isolate “rogue states” with military force and sanctions, the ultimate validity of the label remained widely controversial and contested among analysts, policymakers, and governments. The widespread dismissal exhibited the refusal of many institutions to submit to American ideology and narratives.

#### 4. Conclusion

Using dramatic diction and parlance, policymakers hoped to mobilize public support to help justify sanctions and American intervention. Ronald Reagan, for instance, helped mobilize support for defense spending in the early 1980s by framing the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” (Litwak, 2001). This capitalized on the American tendency to view foreign affairs as a raging battle between good and evil, which made harsh measures seem more appropriate and necessary. Yet many scholars argued that grouping too many diverse regimes under a single designation rendered American policy unable to respond to emerging trends and political dynamics (Litwak, 2001). When observing the North Korean case, the generic strategy exposed the tensions with uniform procedures; scholars observed that the United States found itself limited in its diplomatic avenues and efficiency (Litwak, 2001). Moreover, as pressure to formalize the “rogue state” rubric intensified, American allies and partners became even more opposed to such a “rigid” policy. After the 1986 U.S. Airstrikes against Muammar Qaddafi’s regime in Libya, France adopted a considerably different diplomatic posture from its counterparts, such as the U.S. and Britain. Both demanded that the Libyan suspects be moved to Western courts for trial, whereas France declined to call for the transfer of suspects, acceptance of responsibility, or even compensation as the U.S. demanded



(Schwartz, 2007). France, which was one of America's closest allies at the time, was unwilling to adopt the unilateral strategy that the U.S. pushed for under the "rogue state" label, which echoed the growing disengagement from American diplomatic overtures.

At the same time, research also began to depict that "rogue states" were not exclusively irrational when compared to other authoritarian and non-democratic regimes. This further challenged the American notion that "rogue states" constituted a distinct category. Studies on sanctions and non-proliferation in North Korea and Iran demonstrated how North Korea had repeatedly adjusted its nuclear testing and negotiation posture in response to changing sanctions and security guarantees, which scholars interpret to be an adaptation to pressure (Wertz & Vaez, 2012). Moreover, "rogue states" were depicted as deliberately using nuclear and missile programs as bargaining chips in the face of sanctions and isolation (Henriksen, 2001). Scholars interpreted "rogue states" thus as structuring their proliferation and conflict behavior around anticipated external responses and incentives.

Thus, across the literature reviewed, global variation in responses to "rogue states" is often interpreted by scholars to be a consequence of the label's inherent ambiguity. Instead of representing a coherent, objective set of criteria, the label "rogue state" is portrayed as a historically contingent construct that is heavily based upon American rhetoric. The term, which began as a narrow label to depict states that sponsored terrorism, gradually grew over time to encompass states challenging Western ideologies and pursuing weapons of mass destruction. However, absent a definitional framework with clear criteria, the term continues to remain heavily context-dependent and actor-specific. As a result, many scholars question the label's validity and usefulness, especially considering its historic association with American rhetoric and interests.

All in all, the mass body of scholarship implies that variation in global responses is not merely a byproduct of conflicting interests and ideologies, but something that stems from a deeper disparity in interpretive rhetoric. American foreign policy has continuously illustrated how entrenched historical associations—which are exemplified through case studies such as Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and Cuba—shape expectations and influence the authority of policy choices. Consequent to no universally accepted or agreed-upon criteria for what would constitute a "rogue state," the term altogether remains widely disputed within scholarly circles. What counts as "rogue" is rather dependent on who is doing the labeling, what interests are being prioritized, and what narratives are being considered. The collective body of literature suggests that if "rogue state" remains an ambiguous, uncodified, and disputed label, variation in global responses is best understood as an inherent feature of the term itself.

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## Author Biography

**Sophie Martin** is a 10th grader from Newport Beach, California. Her research argues that the term “rogue state” is vague, politically charged, and deeply embedded within American rhetoric, rather than any objective, codified criteria. She charts how, absent the development of a clear definition, the term expanded from simply describing sponsors of terrorism to being a label for states that challenged Western ideologies and pursued weapons of mass destruction. To her, what counts as “rogue” is entirely dependent on who is doing the labeling, which narratives are prioritized, and how entrenched historical associations shape and legitimize policy choices. In the end, she suggests that so long as the label remains ambiguous and widely disputed, global variation in responses to “rogue states” is best understood not as a product of clashing interests and ideologies, but as an inherent feature of the term itself. Beyond her research, Sophie is involved in community service, civic education, and youth advocacy, and plans on continuing to explore questions related to international relations, politics, and governance in the near future.

## Mentor Contribution Statement

**Dr. Christopher Garrity** provided comprehensive mentorship throughout the development of Sophie’s paper. By assigning her readings on rogue states, he introduced Sophie to key scholarship that allowed her to situate and identify her argument within the existing literature. In addition to providing her with constructive feedback on coherence and structure, he advised her as she worked on analyzing case studies and drafting her paper. He ultimately guided her through the entire process of submitting her work, from selecting a suitable journal to publishing it.

