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Nervous Allies and Trump: Nuclear Lessons from NATO

The question of "sharing" control of nuclear weapons among the United States and allied countries nervous about US defense guarantees is not yet high on the crowded American strategic agenda, but it is emerging. Why? Because of the simultaneous combination of increased threats, reduced American reliability, and longstanding disincentives for building independent nuclear forces. The idea of nuclear sharing, ill-defined as it has been so far, appears as a compromise between alternatives in a strategic dilemma faced by allies such as South Korea who lack their own nuclear forces.

The ally's dilemma is that while total dependence on a US nuclear guarantee is risky, the price of escaping nuclear dependence is also high. Allies calculate that it would be irrational for the Americans to honor their promise when doing so would invite the enemy's nuclear retaliation against them, and when they have less to lose from defeat in a conventional war than the client ally does. But the price for the ally to build its own national nuclear force is expensive in more ways than one: it costs a lot of money; it risks alienating the Americans and undermining the alliance altogether; it takes time to accomplish, inciting the local enemy to consider preventive force in the window before deployment is ready; and it incurs criticism and sanctions from the international community for leaving the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

This dilemma, a major issue for NATO and American policy in the 1950s, has now returned. The post-Cold War era has given way to a new Cold War at the

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same time that President Trump puts American promises to defend allies in more doubt than ever. Donald Trump is an ambivalent revolutionary. His national security policy flows from competing instincts. On one hand, he aims to overturn decades of business as usual with allies, replacing solemn American promises to defend them with transactional conditions and a friendly attitude toward Russia. He has bluntly put allies on notice that they cannot count on the United States as they used to, but has not gone so far as to withdraw from the alliance altogether. On the other hand, his chest-thumping aggressive style, especially toward China, makes "making America great again" dangerous for cautious allies anxious to preserve what American protection they can. This combination generates competing incentives for countries that have relied on Washington's promise of a nuclear umbrella to deter their adversaries.

American allies need to manage the fear of abandonment, which pushes them toward acquiring their own nuclear forces to compensate for distrust of the US promise to escalate on their behalf in event of war. Conversely, they also need to manage the opposite fear of entrapment by constraining the United States' ability to drag them into an unnecessary nuclear war.[1] They need to compensate for less confidence in the alliance, but also keep the alliance as best they can. This is a constant but usually latent dilemma; Trump brings it back into view.

Unless Trump blows up alliances altogether, an ally's need to balance conflicting pressures resurrects the appeal of a compromise option that NATO has managed in different ways over time: some form of sharing control of nuclear weapons. But what would "sharing" mean? In practice, that vague idea runs into big questions about substantive versus symbolic control of the weapons. NATO's varying experience with the question over seven decades illustrates the problem.

The evolution of US arrangements in NATO sheds light on potential nuclear sharing choices

Attention to these issues, long dormant after the old Cold War, has yet to congeal in many countries. Trump is bringing this attention back. One place where the subject has bubbled up is Korea. If a crisis erupts, either from an intensified North Korean threat or further weakening of US support, interest in gaining some apparent nuclear leverage may prompt calls for a kind of sharing for an ally which would prefer not to go all the way to building its own nuclear force. The question will then become whether the sharing is strategically serious or cosmetic. The evolution of US sharing arrangements in NATO sheds light on potential choices.

The Nuclear Sharing Balancing Act

As of the second month of Trump's return as commander-in-chief, attention has focused on the shock he has delivered to NATO and Ukraine. Korea, however, is where nuclear sharing might become a more prominent issue. With North Korea, the Republic of Korea (ROK) confronts an enemy which it needs to deter but also not provoke. Pyongyang has a long history of recklessly belligerent behavior and a recent history of nuclear saber-rattling, including allusions to plans for preventive or preemptive war. In 2022, North Korea passed a law mentioning "the use of nuclear weapons if a 'fatal military attack against important strategic objects' is 'judged to be *on the horizon*' or if necessary for '*taking the initiative* in war.'" In addition, the law "reiterated that … 'a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately' according to an 'operation plan decided in advance' if the leader's command and control 'is placed in danger owing to an attack by hostile forces.'"[2]

> Korea is where nuclear sharing might become a more prominent issue

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the ROK has relied on US military forces deployed in the country and Washington's promise of a nuclear umbrella to deter, or if necessary defend, against another North Korean attack. Concern about this dependence is not new. In 1969, the Nixon Doctrine proclaimed American intent to shift more defense burdens onto client countries themselves. By the turn of the decade, the mainstream of US politics had moved toward military retrenchment, the radical initiative for rapprochement with China was undertaken, and in 1971 Nixon withdrew one of the two divisions of US ground forces that had been stationed in the ROK. That year, ROK president Park Chung-Hee secretly directed development of a fifteen-year plan for nuclear power. Several years later, the Gerald Ford administration turned off the South Korean weapons research, coupling pressure with the carrot of reversing a planned elimination of a joint US and ROK military organization.[3]

Jimmy Carter pushed the military cutback even further later that decade, announcing plans to withdraw the remaining US army division from Korea. After much controversy within the US policy community and an intelligence reassessment of North Korean military capability, that decision was reversed. Thus, over the course of the 1970s, the South Korean government faced incentives to hedge against loss of US protection, flirted briefly with seeking its own nuclear capability, but gave up on the effort when Washington insisted but also reaffirmed its commitment and backed away from some planned pullouts of troops. For another half-century, preservation of reaffirmed US protection

was more important to Seoul than the uncertain benefit of getting its own nuclear weapons.

Reliance on the alliance is wearing thin in the face of the North's fast developing nuclear weapons capability—including missiles with range to reach the continental United States—and Trump's fixation on American burden-shedding. As with the United States' NATO allies in the late 1950s and early '60s, two questions naturally arise about contrasting fears: (1) whether Washington would honor its pledge of nuclear coverage in the event deterrence fails—whether it would "trade Los Angeles for Seoul"—or prefer to abandon the ally; or (2) that if Washington *is* really serious about nuclear threats to deter adversaries, it might suck allies into wartime escalation without their approval. As international security studies expert Glenn Snyder noted, the two fears normally "vary inversely."[4] If Trump bullies both allies and adversaries at the same time, however, the contrasting fears can apply equally.[5]

If the fear of abandonment is intense, having an independent nuclear striking capability gains appeal. This did not happen in NATO. Only Britain and France developed their own nuclear forces, but that was primarily because they still considered themselves great powers with a natural interest in maximum military status irrespective of American policy. None of the other members of NATO did this, in part because of ideas and practices developed for sharing control of American weapons. The Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG's) interest in having some nuclear capability under its control was a major concern to Moscow and a factor in the second Berlin Crisis from 1958-1962. West Germany did not press interest in independent capability, but it encouraged arrangements for the softer alternative of sharing that reduced anxieties of other members of the alliance.[6]

Nuclear Sharing Options: Lessons Learned

These arrangements evolved in markedly different ways from the Eisenhower to Kennedy administrations. Détente suppressed European governments' concern with abandonment for a while, but Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles in the late 1970s revived it and led to the US decision to deploy *Pershing II* ballistic and ground-launched cruise missiles in response, and then to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty banning all such missiles on both sides. These solutions symbolically strengthened American credibility but gave no more control to the allies; the INF Treaty is now defunct.

Non-nuclear members of NATO have not made an issue of their own lack of control over the nuclear deterrent since the 1960s. This was primarily because American commitment to permanent military presence on the continent and

NATO escalation doctrine in principle became thoroughly institutionalized in the decades after Eisenhower. The danger of war in Europe also seemed clearly to recede after the early 1960s and then, for a while after the Cold War, to disappear completely. Now, with war in Ukraine and Trump in Washington, uncertainty about both conditions has returned.

A relevant consideration often forgotten by armchair strategists, however, is that speaking of "the Europeans" or "the Koreans"—allies as units, with uniform preferences—obscures the difference between the positions and rhetoric of governments on one hand and mass public opinion on the other. In Europe, on the few occasions when nuclear weapons policy rose to the level of public attention, a sharp difference between the two became evident. Policymaking elites (more attuned to potential abandonment) worried about strengthening the credibility of NATO doctrine for first use of nuclear weapons, but public opinion (more attuned to entrapment) was markedly anti-nuclear.

The reverse pattern may have emerged in South Korea. Surveys by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Carnegie Endowment and by the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that up to 76 percent of overall public opinion favored South Korea obtaining its own nuclear weapons, while two-thirds of *elite* opinion opposed doing so or were not sure. Half of those two-thirds of elites, however, said they would change their minds if the United States abandoned the ROK.[7]

Among the many differences in the situations and experiences of the ROK and NATO from 1950 to the present is that Seoul's alliance with Washington is bilateral rather than multilateral. Assessing options between two countries is less complex than it was among more than a dozen in NATO's early years. Lacking allies of military consequence apart from the United States, the prospect of winding up alone, without a nuclear counter of its own to the North's threats, seems less and less remote to many in the South. Now, particularly in the wake of Trump's re-election, the ROK may be making new calculations about the risks and benefits of this bilateral arrangement. Should Seoul decide to: (1) risk both abandonment and entrapment by continuing business as usual, relying on the American guarantee despite Trump's conditionalizing American alliance guarantees pointing one way and his erratic attitude toward North Korea pointing the other; (2) build its own nuclear force, with the dual risk of provoking Washington to pull further away while provoking Pyongyang to react forcibly; or (3) seek an intermediate option that hedges against both abandonment and entrapment by holding onto the alliance but gaining some sort of joint role in use of nuclear weapons?

The ROK may be making new risk-benefit calculations about its bilateral arrangement

The first option is the most likely unless political conflict between the two Koreas sharpens; the second is least likely unless the US defense guarantee is revoked; the third is thus implicitly a compromise between the other two extremes. The third option has so far received only muted attention. It has potential attractiveness, however, in a future situation where the first option (business as usual) appears too weak and the second (full nuclear independence, à la Britain and France) appears too strong. The CSIS survey of South Korean elite opinion indicates that sharing is preferred over an independent force by both those who support nuclearization and those who are not sure.[8]

Any arrangements considered for implementing the vague notion of "sharing" require choices about two overlapping issues: (1) custody of deployed nuclear weapons in peacetime; and (2) relative priority of competing concerns about physical control over their launch and detonation during crisis or conventional war. The first is about negative control: assuring the option to block unauthorized, accidental, or deliberate firing of the weapons—in particular in the event of disagreement with the allied partner in the sharing setup. The second is about positive control: the assurance of ability to fire the weapons promptly in the event of a decision to do so. (Military usage of the terms differed in the past, blurring the difference between positive and negative. Political scientist Peter Feaver categorizes the difference in terms of ensuring that the weapons are "always" used as prescribed and "never" used otherwise. My usage equates positive with the former and negative with the latter.)[9] Neither form of control can be maximized without limiting the other. Depending on technical arrangements, the organization of sharing can be a symbolic change in nuclear capability or an actual one, and can distribute actual control in favor of the client ally or of the United States. Concerns about that distribution varied in three phases of the evolution of NATO arrangements: the late 1950s with real sharing emphasizing positive control, the early 1960s with proposals for an ultimately aborted multilateral force (MLF), and ever since.

Real Sharing: Maximizing Positive Control

In the earliest days of the atomic era and NATO development, custody of nuclear weapons was a significant concern. Whether a US civilian agency or the armed services should have possession of the weapons in peacetime was a controversy in the late 1940s, eventually resolved in favor of the military.[10] The "New Look" promulgated by Eisenhower assumed that nuclear weapons would be used promptly and in large numbers in the event of war. In line with this vision, the United States allocated hundreds of its nuclear weapons to allied air forces to deliver when the balloon went up. The military, sensitive to technical complications and the operational requirements for quick action at the outset, focused

primarily on positive control—organizational arrangements to ensure capability to launch the weapons—which led to command-and-control arrangements that were extremely loose by later standards. The shared weapons were supposedly in American custody in peacetime, but in reality this custody was nominal.

Implementation of sharing in this fashion became alarming to some civilian overseers who cared more about negative control. Their concern was about which side in the sharing—the client ally designated to deliver nuclear weapons in wartime or the United States which supplied the bombs—held the actual trigger. Theoretically, and in order to comply with legal requirements of the 1954 Atomic Energy Act, the United States had custody of the weapons in peacetime. Eisenhower, however, relied on a legalistic stretching of the concept which in effect differentiated official custody from physical possession. This allowed a system that came closest of any in history to giving allies positive control over some American weapons—that is, credible assurance, by virtue of physical possession, that they could launch them in wartime. As a practical matter it was, in the words of congressional critics, a "fictional weapons custody system" which entailed risks of "unauthorized use and accidental detonations."[11]

Whether this situation was the best or the worst case depends on whether positive or negative control should be the priority. In any case, it was real sharing, not symbolic, since both sides had positive control. The US positive control of nuclear capability lay in its main forces, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and the navy's fleet ballistic missile force, neither of which allies could stop from striking if the American president so ordered. The allied side's positive control was unofficial, extralegal, and small, but in practical terms quite real. Neither side of the alliance divide had 100 percent reliable negative control. The arrangement scared congressional overseers because of the potential for one of the allied countries, especially the FRG, to launch at least a handful of nuclear weapons without American permission. In a famous incident in 1960, congressional investigators on an inspection trip to NATO discovered German Luftwaffe planes at an airfield on standard peacetime quick reaction alert (QRA) with their nuclear weapons aboard and German pilots in the cockpits. This was the best kind of sharing if the objective was to maximize positive control by both sides of the sharing arrangement, giving the allied countries a stronger sense that the American nuclear guarantee was reliable. In fact, Eisenhower was committed to having the European allies eventually take over the main burden of their defense and giving them de facto control of nuclear weapons so that US custody would amount to "titular possession only."[12]

Thus, the arrangement at the end of the Eisenhower administration was the worst form of sharing if the American priority was negative control. Exclusive physical possession of the weapons allocated to the allied forces was weak

overall. For example, in 1959, a congressman visiting NATO found that "the British officer manning a Thor missile actually held both keys in the two-key custody system," and then found the American defense department "indifferent" to this fact.[13] The QRA aircraft were the most extreme example of negligible negative control. The only US restraint on the ability of West Germans to launch the nuclear-armed planes was a single American enlisted man posted with each plane or two, with uncertain or impractical instructions about what to do if they tried to take off without US authorization.[14] The investigators' report worried about potential for: "1) individual take-over by a 'psychotic' from the host country forces; 2) group take-over during a 'colonels revolution' in the host country; 3) complete take-over by the existing government of the host country in a period of extreme tension."[15]

The late Eisenhower administration arrangement was the worst if the priority is negative control

In any case, de facto West German control of the QRA weapons meant in effect that the FRG had at least a bit of independent nuclear capability. Although the weapons in question were a very small part of the nuclear striking power expected to be employed in war, they reflected the Eisenhower system's clear privileging of positive over negative control. The result of this way of maximizing readiness for war was that, in a pinch, an ally could override a US veto of nuclear use. At the same time, the ally had no negative control over the main American nuclear force. There is no indication, however, that this situation, resulting from purely operational concerns and unknown to few outside the professional military, did anything to relieve European strategists' doubts about relying on the American promise to escalate on their behalf.

Concern at the level of professional strategic management about loose control of allied access to American nuclear weapons did not come into public view during this period, but the Kennedy administration moved out of this phase of sharing in the 1960s. While allocation of nuclear weapons to allied strike forces continued, control arrangements were tightened and permissive action links (PALs)—coded locks that could only be opened by American action—were introduced, providing a technological barrier to allied hijacking of weapons. Thus, incentives to give the allies better assurance of nuclear participation remained as growing Soviet capability eroded confidence in the American umbrella. This energized interest in another form of sharing—an institutionalized multilateral force (MLF).

Pseudo-Sharing: The MLF

Eisenhower and Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Lauris Norstad had envisioned the possibility of a thoroughly multilateral nuclear force that would make NATO as a collectivity "the fourth atomic power." In 1960, there was even consideration of developing a force of 300 *Polaris* missiles to be under control of the NATO Council.[16] However, Eisenhower's successors have never favored devolution of American authority over initiation of nuclear operations. While the Kennedy administration buttressed exclusive American control of American weapons, it was still faced with allies' worries about the flexible response strategy. Along with Soviet deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles, this gave a different collective scheme, the MLF, some appeal.

For several years, Washington and the Europeans wrestled with ideas about how to organize the MLF. The main idea was a set of ships with multinational crews and weapons jointly owned. The idea was problematic from the start. Any scheme fell to questions about strategic logic, operational practicality, or political feasibility. To maximize the European role, most of the MLF fleet would be surface ships, but this meant the force would be more vulnerable to Soviet attack. The most fundamental issues had no realistic solution: Who would have authority to launch the weapons? Should each NATO member have a veto? Should the United States give up its veto? Should the decision be made by majority vote? The proposed force would be too small to cover a whole war plan so could not solve the problem of reliance on US escalation. The requirement of more than one national decision to use it would make paralysis likely if it was called on. The mechanics of a modern command-and-control system are hard enough in a national force and the difficulty would be compounded for a multinational one.[17] Mixed crews were mandated by the basic principle of operational multilateralism but were of dubious operational practicality. The strategic contradictions in the scheme reflected the underlying problem that "it was never entirely clear whether the Europeans wanted a finger on the nuclear trigger or on the safety catch."[18]

Of course the Europeans, as well as the Americans, wanted both, but if either side had positive control, it would negate the other side's negative control, and vice versa. Given this ambivalence, a multinational force would not eliminate either risk. If the risk was abandonment, the MLF could not solve it without eliminating the US veto, an option in which Washington had no interest. If the problem was entrapment, the MLF could not prevent Washington from using the rest of its nuclear force outside the MLF. As political scientist Albert Wohlstetter

If either side has positive control, it would negate the other side's negative control, and vice versa

wrote at the time, "Plans for joint controls, then, provide no assurance that the NATO strike force will itself respond, and none that SAC will not."[19]

What kept the MLF idea alive as the principal option under alliance discussion for several years was its political utility—the appearance of implementing the principle of nuclear sharing. Diplomats could show their seriousness about solving the abandonment/entrapment dilemma by considering operational arrangements that few military professionals thought sensible while avoiding a final choice that would reveal the concept's weakness. Promoting the MLF may have dampened incentives for independent nuclear forces among Europeans with superficial ideas about strategy, but ultimately other American pressures were more salient in dissuading their governments from building such forces.

Resolution: Operational Sharing, Strategic Dependence

Six decades ago, NATO more or less settled on the arrangement that endured for the rest of the Cold War and ever since: US nuclear weapons assigned to allied forces remain in US custody—real, rather than fictional, custody—in peacetime. Then, and even after they might be distributed for the German, Turkish, or other aircraft in a near-war alert, the United States could still keep control of their detonation via control of their PALs.

This system reflects the decline of European allies' concern about abandonment as the long institutionalization of reliable US leadership took hold. Eisenhower's aim of weaning the allies from American military protection died and the indefinite presence of US ground forces as well as nuclear became taken for granted, despite periodic gripes from Washington about burden-sharing. The end of the Cold War ended attention to military strategy against Russia altogether for more than twenty years.

The Dubious Future of Nuclear Sharing

Times have changed. Vladimir Putin's revival of the danger of war and Donald Trump's demand that allies pay more for American protection or risk losing it have, to say the least, brought strategic anxiety back. True, concern about the Russian threat and the need to counter it with nuclear weapons is not as sharp as in the old days when Moscow was touted as having 175 or more divisions to throw against NATO. The Soviet Union's implosion and NATO's expansion reversed the imbalance of conventional military power that had fueled concern about ownership of nuclear deterrents in the 1950s and '60s. The hot war in Ukraine reignites concern about Moscow's intent, however, and the awkward geographic vulnerability of the Baltic states poses unique challenges to NATO's capabilities to defend them with conventional forces alone. Estonia,

for example, is tiny in size and logistically isolated from the depth of material support in the rest of NATO. But the three Baltics are not Germany; their average population is only about two million each. And significant interest in an independent nuclear force has not arisen in Germany. None of these states most relevant to the question yet seem plausible candidates to consider building national nuclear forces of their own.

The Trump revolution unfolding at the time of this writing could turn all strategic maneuvering upside down. If alliance equilibrium recovers, escalation by the West in the event of war (the Baltics aside) does not seem as militarily necessary as it did in the Cold War, and the symbolic sharing system of the past half century has excited no criticism, so the question of sharing is not as pressing for NATO as it seemed around 1960. The issue may get dusted off, however, as Trump has further weakened American commitment without withdrawing from the alliance altogether. Europeans seek more assurance, but there is no groundswell yet to build national nuclear forces beyond those of Britain and France. Fear of abandonment so brutally heightened by Trump and JD Vance's in-your-face scolding of NATO countries makes some multilateral scheme reminiscent of the MLF potentially appealing as a cosmetic solution to the problem. By the time the nuclear question comes onto the front burner, however, multilateral sharing may not be about sharing by the United States, but by Britain and France with the other European members of the alliance if American retreat is codified.

In any scenario, the most strategically relevant point remains: as long as the nuclear power providing the shared weapons retains negative control over them, the idea of nuclear sharing matters little beyond symbolism for solidarity. The NATO scheme that amounted to giving allies de facto control of some number of American nuclear weapons—the late Eisenhower system—amounted at most to enabling a small unadmitted but actual independent nuclear capability for officially non-nuclear allies. That situation has not been considered an option since it was terminated almost seven decades ago. The later system of ensuring an American veto over use of weapons allocated to allied forces through technological safeguards (PALs) made that allocation more or less a matter of operational military planning revocable by Washington in a crisis. It does not plausibly relieve any allied desire for a meaningful role in decisions about launching and detonating the weapons.

Whether the vague principle of nuclear sharing, or several options for it, return as significant issues depends on the trajectory of US commitment to the alliance. If the Trump revolution destroys already-damaged confidence in Washington's honoring of the NATO Treaty's Article 5—the principle that all members are expected to come to the defense of any that is attacked—serious European strategists will face the question of relying on the French and

British members for nuclear strategy, or building additional national nuclear forces that might or might not be coordinated somehow.

The intermediate approach of a multilateral sharing arrangement including the United States, represented briefly long ago by the MLF, offers no obvious benefit aside from symbolic preservation of the American guarantee. That strategically disingenuous benefit could appeal to those who want to avoid facing the political costs of either nuclear independence or American abandonment, but the image of Trump's recklessness promotes equal concern with entrapment—so for Europe, the MLF-type option seems empty.

Korea

The sharing slogan could have more traction in South Korea. In a bilateral alliance, in contrast to NATO's thirty-two countries, Seoul has no equivalent of Britain and France—allies apart from the United States—to offer some potential substitute for the American nuclear guarantee. The difference between public and elite opinion could also narrow if threat perception increases. Two-thirds of the South Korean elites who opposed nuclearization indicated they would change their minds in the scenario of US abandonment. Of those initially opposed to ROK nuclear capability, well over half preferred a sharing arrangement and little more than a tenth favored indigenously produced weapons. The form of sharing reported in the poll was "with South Korea's conventional delivery vehicles and *dual control* by South Korea and the United States."[20] That telegraphic phrase sounds like the final NATO arrangement of the past half-century. Moreover, the pattern of opinion on the nuclear questions does not strongly follow partisan lines, so "a groundswell of support for nuclearization would not be a polarizing issue in South Korea."[21]

Seoul has no equivalent of Britain or France to offer some potential substitute nuclear guarantee

The preference for sharing as the form of new nuclear capability could become more controversial if the ambiguity of what "dual control" means is highlighted. The pattern of reported poll responses—especially the lowest level of support being for redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons under US control alone to the country—implies that the primary ROK concern is about negative control and entrapment. If dual control means that either Seoul or Washington could veto use of the weapons, however, the arrangement would not really address the abandonment issue. When ambiguity about dual control is clarified, the attraction of the sharing slogan falters, and the South Korean debate may

hinge on the choice between an indigenous ROK nuclear force or none. The situation in which the NATO-like sharing option prevails is likely to be if confidence in US commitment to the alliance is strengthened, perhaps post-Trump, at the same time that the North Korean threat appears to be ratcheting up.

A sharing arrangement like the one institutionalized in NATO could also coexist with a third option that has gained support as a less provocative alternative to a fielded ROK force: nuclear "latency." This would organize and prepare the building blocks for a nuclear force without crossing the line to assembling weapons, so that if policy changes, accomplishment of deployment would be quick rather than prolonged, reducing risk of enemy preventive attack. This would be easier than when Park started the abortive program over fifty years ago because the infrastructure and expertise involved in peaceful nuclear power for energy generation are now further advanced in South Korea. Such a move would still be criticized as incompatible with NPT membership, but it could also provide leverage in maneuvers with North Korea, China, and the United States, and would signal reasons to consider sharing control of weapons as an intermediate solution. Latency, however, more or less describes what Iran's nuclear energy program produced. This has pushed Israel toward a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure which will surprise few observers if it happens any day. North Korea cannot be assumed to be more tolerant of ROK nuclear latency than Israel is of Iran's.

Beyond Korea

It is hard to think of other countries that may come to demand improvement of American nuclear guarantees or sharing arrangements. The Middle East, South Asia, or East Asia beyond Korea are the areas where nuclearization of military competition seem most probable. The United States has no alliance role in the India-Pakistan conflict where both sides have independent forces anyway. De facto ally Israel has its own nuclear weapons and whatever sort of formal alliance Washington might enter with Saudi Arabia will probably not include a promise to use nuclear weapons on its behalf or to provide them in any form of sharing. Iran does not pose a situation that could call on the United States to honor a commitment to escalate; indeed, in the Middle East it is Americans that need to fear entrapment—by Israel dragging Washington into war over Iran's evolving nuclear capability.

In East Asia, Taiwan is the most likely scene for American involvement in major war. Its unique and supremely awkward juridical and political status, however, precludes any explicit American nuclear guarantee or assistance in deploying any sort of nuclear-armed force. Even American waging of conventional war on Taipei's behalf is not definitely promised. So the most likely occasion

for war does not appear to have anything to do with considerations of sharing US nuclear weapons.

The biggest other potential case in East Asia is Japan, which the world has taken for granted as thoroughly allergic to any involvement with nuclear weapons. One development that might override that allergy would be South Korean deployment of an independent nuclear force, upending the status hierarchy in the US-Asian alliance system. No country wants to see a Japanese nuclear force. If maintaining US ownership of nuclear forces in Korea via a sharing arrangement would not tip Tokyo over the edge as an ROK-owned force likely would, it would in effect support nonproliferation objectives by modestly increasing South Korean participation in nuclear operations.

What if Tokyo did tip? Would nuclear sharing with the United States, à la NATO's now longstanding system, be an alternative to a national Japanese force? It is hard to see Japan flipping from its deep nuclear weapons allergy unless the Korean development coincided with wholesale American abrogation of the Mutual Security Treaty (MST) that has long obliged it to defend Japan. In that case, nuclear sharing would hardly be an option to compete with the choice of an independent deterrent force.

Is Nuclear Sharing Worthwhile?

If nuclear sharing is implemented in the form of the late Eisenhower system (especially if on a larger scale than just the QRA aircraft) it would give the allied country the hypothetical physical capability to override American negative control. This would allay the ally's abandonment concern, but as such would be a disingenuous alternative to fielding an independent allied force. Almost seven decades since the Eisenhower system of only "titular" control was terminated, there is no discernable lobby for reviving it. What would be the US interest in such a radical arrangement so long after the 1950s assumption that war would be nuclear from the start? If the principle of sharing is honored instead in some MLF-like scheme, it could be a substantively dubious but symbolically useful alternative to admitting a choice between an expensive and provocative independent nuclear force or dependence on American willingness to subordinate its own strategic interests to the alliance's. That said, symbols do matter as political statements that can suppress or divert criticism in public relations.

The one form of sharing that poses fewer costs than the other two is the now routine NATO practice, which has only operational planning implications rather than strategic or political significance. Indeed, it is hardly noticed anymore. If desired by an ROK government that would otherwise build its own nuclear force, the NATO-style system should be acceptable to the United States.

Despite the recent revival of speculation about South Korean interest in nuclear weapons, however, a sharing arrangement still seems the least likely outcome. If the US-ROK alliance blows up completely under Trump, Seoul would logically choose to field its own nuclear force. Otherwise, the best bet at present is that Seoul and Washington will continue with the business-as-usual non-nuclear option for the ROK. The economic, diplomatic, and military reasons inhibiting American allies, or any countries for that matter, from fielding their own nuclear weapons have always been strong; that is why there are still only nine countries in the world deploying this now eighty-year-old military technology. Moreover, South Korea's internal politics, like America's, are in disarray, preoccupied with other issues, and a debate on nuclear sharing would probably overload the domestic political arena.

> A sharing arrangement still seems the least likely outcome with South Korea

The business-as-usual option could also be modified with other symbolic initiatives or substantive ones milder than direct involvement with nuclear weapons. One symbol is the principle of consultation. In 2024, the United States and ROK affirmed the Nuclear Consultation Group for considering "joint and combined planning and execution of U.S.-ROK CNI [Conventional and Nuclear Integration] options on the Korean Peninsula."[22] This sounds like NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, which was instituted to bring allies into the organizational process of contingency planning.

In the end, the idea of sharing, to the extent it has been manifested since the 1960s, is only a symbolic compromise between abject dependence and full nuclear independence. It does not give the client ally the capability to use nuclear weapons if Washington reneges on its umbrella promise, nor prevent Washington from escalating against the ally's wishes. It leaves unadorned authority to initiate nuclear operations no different from what it was before sharing was adopted. The value of symbolic coordination could be enough to paper over the strategic dilemma as long as the slide in perceived American reliability goes no further. If alliances do tumble further in the Trump era, or cannot be repaired enough after it, sharing would not be enough to keep the dilemma submerged. Without the vibrant institutionalization of many decades that underlay NATO, the MST, and the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, it is nearly impossible to see why or how a nuclear sharing arrangement could seem feasible anyway.

> In the end, the idea of sharing is only a symbolic compromise … but symbols do matter politically

Notes

1. On the abandonment/entrapment dilemma, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 466–467.
2. Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea Passes Nuclear Law," Arms Control Association, October 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law. Emphasis added.
3. Yelim Shin, "Balancing Security and Autonomy: South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions Amid U.S. Strategic Shifts," unpublished paper, September 30, 2024, 9–11.
4. Snyder, "Security Dilemma," 467.
5. For arguments favoring an independent ROK force, see Robert F. Kelly and Min-Hyung Kim, "Why South Korea Should Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 1 (January/February 2025).
6. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Chapter 5.
7. Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2022, 2; Victor Cha, "Breaking Bad: South Korea's Nuclear Option," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2024, 5–11.
8. Cha, *Breaking Bad*, 12, 14, 17.
9. Peter Douglas Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992): 12n, 12–21.
10. Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians*, Chapter 4; see also 176–182.
11. Representative Chet Holifield, "Report on Inspection Trip to NATO Countries, Top Secret," Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, February 15, 1961, 2, in *The U.S. Nuclear Presence in Western Europe, 1954-1962*, Part II, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28543-document-5-representative-chet-holifield-chairman-ad-hoc-subcommittee-president (hereafter: Holifield Report).
12. Quoted in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 200; see also 147–160, 166, 176, 197–199.
13. Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians*, 176–177.
14. Holifield Report, 33–34, 53–54.
15. *Ibid*., 32.
16. Alastair Buchan, "The Multilateral Force: A Study in Alliance Politics," *International Affairs* 40, no. 4 (October 1964): 622.
17. Henry A. Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership: A Re-appraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966): 131, 148–150.
18. J. Michael Legge, *Theater Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response*, R-2964-FF (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1983): 13.
19. Albert Wohlstetter, "Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country," *Foreign Affairs* 39, no. 3 (April 1961): 373.
20. Cha, *Breaking Bad*, 8–10, 12–13; emphasis added.
21. *Ibid*., 16.
22. US Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, "Joint Press Statement on the 3d Consultative Group (NCG) Meeting," June 10, 2024.