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"Friendly" Nuclear Proliferation and its Discontents

In the mid-1960s, before the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) entered into force in 1970, nuclear explosive tests by France and China ruptured assumptions about the atomic weapons club being accessible to only a select few —at that time, just the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union. These events precipitated contentious debates in Washington over what the United States should do. Should Washington aim to prevent all future proliferation, attempt to limit proliferation to a few additional allies, or learn to live in a world with many more nuclear-armed countries? In that context, some US officials and experts argued that exceptions should be made for select US friends whose nuclear possession was seen either as inevitable or potentially additive to US security.[1]

Writing in 1965 in *Foreign Affairs*, William C. Foster, then director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and a former deputy secretary of defense, offered a direct rebuttal: "The case for 'limited' proliferation seems to me to be based on two premises that are both implausible and inconsistent … First, that proliferation could be controlled as selectively as we might like; and second, that a country with the world-wide commitments of the United States could avoid involving itself in any conflict on a scale where nuclear capabilities would be significant."[2] The logic captured in Foster's essay has motivated US policy ever since. Successive administrations set about erecting international

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institutions, strengthening security alliances, and enacting domestic legal structures to dampen or deter other states' interest in seeking the bomb, often in cooperation with the Soviet Union.[3] With a few notable exceptions—states such as Israel, India, and Pakistan, whose nuclear weapons ambitions mostly predated international nonproliferation regimes—these efforts have been remarkably effective at limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Other US allies and partners, such as Italy and Sweden, that flirted with bomb programs from the 1960s through the 1980s ultimately shelved their ambitions. This is no small achievement.

Today, however, some officials, politicians, and non-governmental analysts are again touting the potential merits of "friendly" proliferation in Washington and several allied capitals such as Seoul, Tokyo, or Warsaw, among others.[4] These views are often couched in casual hypotheticals: "would it really be so bad if ally X, Y, or Z had nuclear weapons?" Yet, as the security landscape in multiple regions continues to deteriorate amid rising threats from Russia, China, and North Korea, these thought experiments are becoming more serious. Some proliferation advocates argue that additional nuclear-armed allies might even serve US interests by enhancing allies' ability to protect themselves.[5]

That somehow nuclear weapons possession would resolve security challenges is wishful thinking

These are not new ideas, of course, and the intervening decades have made them no less specious. That somehow nuclear weapons possession would resolve for the United States and its allies the intractable security challenges and tensions inherent in extended deterrence alliances at a time of rapid change in the global order is essentially strategic wishful thinking. Rather than relitigating the arguments in favor of friendly proliferation, therefore, this article imagines the world that would emerge from such a radical change in the nuclear weapons landscape. It wrestles with the thorny "then what" questions that advocates of friendly proliferation rarely engage with in a meaningful way, which highlight the consequences of a more nuclearized world.

The article begins with an examination of friendly proliferation in the context of the contemporary domestic and geopolitical drivers that are pushing the United States and its allies toward more transactional relationships. It explores the broad impacts on US security that would follow a decision to embrace US friends that acquire nuclear weapons. It then reverses the lens and assesses implications for US friends that might choose nuclear arms, to include consequences for the existing US alliance systems in Europe and Asia. Next, it evaluates the global effects of a full erosion of multilateral mechanisms to arrest proliferation

that would result from abandonment of the nonproliferation system by the United States and its nuclear-arming friends. From this assessment of the vicissitudes of a proliferated world, the article contends that the increased risks of nuclear crises, arms racing, and nuclear use would cause severe damage to the interests of the United States, its allies, and the rest of the world. Given the costs that would accrue from friendly proliferation, the article concludes with an argument for clarity in US policy on friendly proliferation as a first step toward finding offramps from the illusory inevitability that one or more US allies should get the bomb.

Friends With (Nuclear) Benefits?

Many of the states most likely to seek nuclear weapons today are currently living under the US nuclear umbrella. This is a jarring shift, given that for the last several decades proliferation concerns centered on so-called "rogue states" such as North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and Iran. That several US friends, all members in good standing of international nonproliferation regimes, are contemplating nuclear weapons indicates the scale of security anxiety in allied capitals. Friendly states in which nuclear weapon options appear to be under at least some amount of public debate are Germany, Japan, Poland, South Korea, Sweden, and Ukraine.[6] In the past, pro-nuclear arguments were dismissed as typical hand-wringing or attempted security bargaining, but the normalization and prevalence of pro-nuclear discourse suggests it should be taken seriously.

Threats from nuclear-armed adversaries are well established in the security calculus of the United States and its friends. Thus, the main source of unpredictability is whether the existing mutual defense alliances that extend US nuclear deterrence into Europe and Asia will endure, evolve, or unravel. Driven by nationalist, isolationist sentiments, the Trump administration tends to view US allies as security free riders, and has pursued a more transactional approach toward long-time US friends in both security and trade policy.[7] For their part, many US friends no longer view the United States as a reliable security guarantor, or even all that friendly. The United States and its allies may continue to perceive areas of overlapping interest, but these may be more incidental than enduring.

The uncertainty in future relations between the United States and its allies raises questions about the very notion of friendly proliferation. Would Washington accept proliferation to preserve a friendship? Would proliferation by some allies be seen as friendly to US interests?

If a current US ally opted to seek nuclear weapons, Washington would confront a sharp fork in the road: tolerate the ally's nuclear arms and sustain the

alliance in contravention of sixty years of fairly successful nonproliferation policy, or enact mandatory sanctions and deliberately decouple or abandon the alliance in a major departure from its basic security approach. US leaders would need to decide whether they believed the potential utility of a nuclear-armed ally (in hopes it would join the United States in a future conflict) would be greater than the potential risks that derive from it being nuclear-armed. Either choice —tolerance or abandonment—would have profound security implications.

Proponents of friendly proliferation clearly favor the former path and point to a few purported, if somewhat contradictory, benefits. They assert that this approach could limit US exposure to lower-stakes regional conflicts, increase the credibility of collective defense and deterrence, provide allies with greater defense autonomy and reduce US defense burdens, or allow the United States to focus on primary security threats, namely China.[8] The vision is clearly seductive.

Proliferation is Not Friendly to US Interests

Though fanciful visions of nuclear bonhomie seem great, over time the realities are more likely to run counter to US interests. Embracing friendly proliferation would increase US risk exposure and reduce its ability to influence the course of future conflicts that could go nuclear.

Having more nuclear-armed allies would not obviate or likely even diminish US risk exposure

So long as the United States maintains alliances in any form in Europe or Asia, it will remain entangled in future contingencies. Just as Washington would expect that its allies will support the United States in a conflict with an adversary, those allies will expect US backing in a contingency with their adversaries. Having more nuclear-armed allies does not obviate or likely even diminish US risk exposure, yet it could increase the frequency and likelihood of nuclear crises.

For example, if a nuclear-armed Japan were to find itself in a conflict with China or Russia over disputed territory, Tokyo would still expect Washington to have its back—including through involvement of US military forces deployed in the region and, ultimately, employment of US nuclear weapons. Beijing or Moscow understandably would have the same expectation, regardless of whether US troops were actually in the fight. Although they would want to avoid provoking US involvement if they could help it, nevertheless China and Russia would plan for strikes on US forces in the region and potentially the

US homeland. Even if Washington explicitly indicated it would not support an ally's war aims (probably ending the alliance in the process), the United States and its regionally deployed military forces could still be subject to reprisals that would draw it into unwanted conflict.

Nuclear-armed friends also may feel more emboldened to advance or escalate conflicts against Washington's wishes.[9] A degree of moral hazard has always existed for the United States with its allies. Although the "special relationship" between the United Kingdom and United States may be seen as a model for close coordination among nuclear-armed allies, it is worth recalling Washington's strong objections to the UK-France-Israel invasion of Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis, which triggered a Soviet nuclear threat and led Washington to use economic coercion to force withdrawal of allied forces from Egypt. More recently, former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's 2024 decision to fly drones over Pyongyang in an attempt to provoke a North Korean military response that would allow him to declare martial law could easily have sparked a conflict that would have implicated US Forces Korea.[10] This was dangerous enough, but would have been more so if South Korea possessed nuclear weapons too. Thus, rather than reducing US exposure to conflict, having additional nuclear-armed allies could increase the incidence of nuclear crises that would impact the United States. And, as the Suez Crisis demonstrated, the United States would likely have less ability to control the course of events even as it would remain exposed to risks of grave damage.

A world with more nuclear-armed US friends would also feature inherently more complex geometric deterrence relationships. The three-way US nuclear calculus with Russia and China is already complicated and growing more so with North Korea's advancing nuclear arsenal. If South Korea or Japan were to acquire nuclear weapons, it is likely that deeper arms racing and crisis instability would result in Asia. North Korea, for instance, would likely seek offsetting capabilities and become more concerned about the potential for coordinated disarming strikes. China seems likely to double down on its arsenal of theater nuclear forces, which in turn would likely be perceived to undermine US deterrence in the region. Command and control challenges would also grow, especially for frontline US allies with nuclear weapons. Given the very short decision timeframes that would feature in conflicts for those states, pressures to use nuclear weapons early and first would be high. Accordingly, they may be tempted to pre-delegate launch authority, which increases risks of unauthorized or accidental nuclear use. The same pressures would apply to their nuclear-armed adversaries and could

If South Korea or Japan were nuclear, countries in Asia would have very short decision timeframes

drive them to similarly shift toward a more aggressive but highly dangerous "launch on warning" posture.

Stabilizing such a system with any sort of arms control measures would be immensely difficult given the asymmetries involved. Defense planning and nuclear posture among US nuclear-armed allies would have to become more closely coordinated on targeting, operations, declaratory policy, and employment decisions. Most likely, US policymakers also would opt to boost America's arsenals, both conventional and nuclear, to sustain deterrence of evolving adversary threats.[11] In other words, the advent of additional nuclear-armed allies probably would not decrease the US defense burden and might actually increase it, with concomitant defense spending in search of sustained military advantage.

Finally, it is worth stipulating that nuclear weapons possession is probably permanent, while friendships can be fickle. Nuclear-armed allies may not remain allies, especially if they sought nuclear weapons to reduce dependence on the United States in the first place. Washington opted to overlook Pakistan's nuclear weapons development during the 1980s in order to secure its cooperation in countering the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Subsequently, Pakistan's nuclear program became a source of technology for the bomb programs in North Korea, Iran, and Libya, and a major concern for terrorist acquisition of nuclear materials. Now, it is reportedly developing long-range missiles that some American officials worry are aimed at deterring the United States.[12] Soviet leaders no doubt regretted their prior nuclear aid that enabled China to build nuclear weapons, before the Sino-Soviet split that predated their 1969 border clash. Thus, as much as Poland might be a strong US ally that would be responsible with nuclear weapons, it would be a huge gamble to assume Warsaw would always act in ways friendly to US interests or remain a best friend forever. In the long run, hugging newly armed friends even tighter would be unlikely to deliver enduring benefits that would clearly outweigh the manifest consequences for US security.

Nuclear Benefits for Friends?

The view from the opposite shores of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans may look understandably different. With its weaponization of economic and security integration, Washington has tightened the bind on many of its friends. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney succinctly put it in January 2026 remarks at Davos, "Allies will diversify to hedge against uncertainty. They'll buy insurance, increase options in order to rebuild sovereignty—sovereignty that was once grounded in rules, but will be increasingly anchored in the ability to withstand pressure."[13]

In the face of such profound uncertainty, nuclear weapons could look like an attractive way to diversify and hedge one's security. Perhaps allies will wait for the 2028 US presidential election to see whether some reversion to more traditional US security and economic policies looks likely. If not, then nuclear weapons—or a nuclear weapons option, at least—could have greater appeal than continued alliance uncertainty amid growing external threats.[14]

Allies that choose to pursue the bomb might hope to negotiate relationships similar to how the United States engages with the United Kingdom and France. Both of those states eventually overcame US resistance to their nuclear arms, albeit well before the creation of the nonproliferation regime and thus not in direct contravention of US law and policy. Today, Washington and London cooperate extensively in nuclear weapons technology that is integral to sustaining the UK nuclear submarine force. There is also considerable sharing of nuclear information and planning among all three allies. Neither are frontline states, however, and thus the risks attending their nuclear weapons possession for the United States have remained relatively low.

Alternatively, some US friends might aim for a more transactional security relationship with Washington, backed by their own nuclear possession—similar to the ties that Israel enjoys. They might calculate that nuclear-armed autonomy to ward off great power predation would be the best security approach, presuming they could satisfy US leaders that this would serve Washington's interests, too. Such a relationship might still involve defense cooperation, for instance, but perhaps with changes to US conventional and nuclear force posture or attenuation of blanket mutual defense commitments.

For US friends, nuclear weapons could easily come to be seen as the better security hedge and the ultimate form of self-help. Before testing that proposition, however, the allies would want to evaluate the full range of implications. They are likely to conclude that nuclear weapons are not a curative for ailing security, but a prescription for greater conflict risks at far higher costs.

Fallout from Seeking the Bomb

The risks to a US friend that opts for nuclear self-arming could begin to accrue very early. As leaders in Tehran discovered repeatedly over the last several decades, as recently as last summer, fears that one's nuclear activities might yield weapons can trigger violent preventive efforts by others. Because nuclear weapons take several years to develop, test, and manufacture, any state that seeks them must endure a period of vulnerability during which their adversaries, allies, and domestic opponents will attempt to stop them.[15] Preventive efforts could begin well before a clear decision by top leaders, whether declared in public or made in secret, to proceed

with nuclear weapons. States would remain vulnerable to counterproliferation through the process of producing the requisite quantities of bomb fuel, highly enriched uranium or plutonium; weaponizing that material into warheads that had undergone rigorous design validation and testing; mounting warheads on fully demonstrated delivery systems that could target an adversary's critical interests; and inducting nuclear weapons into military units specifically trained to carry out nuclear operations. It is likely only after an arming state acquired a survivable arsenal of, say, 100 or more weapons that this vulnerability would wane, even as fears of disarming or damage limiting strikes on nuclear weapons would remain.

Preventive efforts could entail a range of actions. The most violent would involve kinetic attacks aimed at disabling or destroying the core facilities involved in nuclear weapons production—as Israel did in bombing Syria's suspected nuclear reactor at Al Kibar in 2007. Military strikes might also be used to destabilize or depose a government that was perceived to be pursuing nuclear weapons—as the United States did against Iraq in 2003, albeit on the basis of flawed intelligence and catastrophic decision-making. Assassinating key personnel involved in the nuclear weapons effort is another potential form of violent disruption.[16]

In the case of US allies that go for the bomb, reversal attempts might not involve direct attacks, but instead non-kinetic means, for example sabotaging nuclear facilities—like the "Olympic Games" cyber-attack by Israel and the United States on Iran's nuclear facilities—or supply chains, or broader measures to hobble critical infrastructure or energy supply.[17] Economic sanctions or other punitive trade or financial measures are another likely means of dissuasion. Notably, in the last decade South Korea and Japan have both been on the receiving end of such economic actions by China—a freeze on tourism and targeting of certain Korean companies and cessation of critical mineral supply, respectively.[18] These measures caused significant damage to both the Korean and Japanese economies as punishment for actions that probably were far less injurious to Chinese interests than if either were to acquire nuclear weapons. There also is the potential for censure and other forms of pressure through multilateral institutions, and also for disruption in relations with key states or regional partners.

Finally, the period of vulnerability could include the need to manage domestic opposition. Democratically-elected governments would probably need to survive at least one election in which the implications of the weapons decision would be subject of debate, potentially jeopardizing continuity of the program.

With Friends Like These …

Leaders of US friends that opt for nuclear weapons might assess these risks are worth taking and can be survived, both materially and politically. They might

also hope for US protection during the arming process. But this hope highlights an awkward dynamic. Would a US leader choose to shield an ally in the process of building nuclear bombs at the risk of being drawn into the very conflict that ally's weapons would be meant to help the United States avoid? Or might US politicians (particularly in an America First moment) be more likely to say, "sorry, you're on your own now," turning fear of decoupling and abandonment into a self-fulfilling prophecy?[19] Even if a US leader was willing to run these risks, that wouldn't necessarily imply a long-term commitment to maintain the alliance given the negative impacts to US security discussed above. A nuclear-arming ally, therefore, would be gambling on its future ability to effectively deter threats without the United States in its corner. American leaders could reasonably conclude that nuclear-armed allies should be able to fend for themselves, and that the US nuclear umbrella or forward deployed military personnel on that ally's territory are no longer needed. In fact, from an American perspective, alliance decoupling could be the main feature of acquiescing to an ally's nuclear arms. At least, US allies would want to factor this eventuality into their calculus.

Would a US leader choose to shield an ally in the process of building nuclear bombs?

For Nordic, German, or South Korean leaders considering nuclear options, then, it would be prudent to compare their current security under the US nuclear umbrella, fraught and complicated as it is, against a future in which they had to face Russian or Chinese and North Korean nuclear threats, respectively, without firm US backing. Is the potential utility of extended deterrence from an unreliable protector greater than the potential risks of having to go it alone (or, for Europeans, with some other form of smaller regional nuclear deterrence that begs all manner of credibility questions)? This question is worth debating.

Further, given Russian, Chinese, and North Korean military and nuclear capabilities, the defense expenditures that would be required by US friends to build and sustain national programs for nuclear and conventional arms sufficient to achieve effective deterrence would be massive. There is a temptation to believe that nuclear weapons can substitute for conventional weapons, but the experience of most other nuclear-armed states to date indicates the opposite.[20] Simply put, nuclear weapons tend not to deter at lower levels of violence or early in an escalating conflict. For those reasons, leaders have found it necessary to build up conventional forces, too, both to attempt to deter lower-level conflict and to raise the threshold for nuclear use. It is incredibly costly and can be very politically and operationally difficult to sustain both nuclear and conventional arms programs over decades.

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte highlighted exactly this issue in January 2026 to European audiences, pointedly observing, "If you really want to go it alone, and those who are pleading for that, forget that you can never get there with 5% [of GDP in defense spending]. It will be 10%. You have to build up your own nuclear capability. That costs billions and billions of euros. You will lose then in that scenario, you would lose the ultimate guarantor of our freedom, which is the U.S. nuclear umbrella. So hey, good luck."[21] In sum, though the allure of independent nuclear arms is understandable, there are great risks for US allies in choosing that future which make friendly proliferation more national security chimera than cure. Both the United States and its friends would likely end up facing greater insecurity as a result.

Risks Beyond the Friend Group

A key, if unstated, premise in the friendly proliferation discourse is that a few more states acquiring nuclear weapons wouldn't constitute a major change in international security. Proponents assume, for instance, that an increase from nine to ten or eleven nuclear-armed states would not trigger a cascade resulting in twenty or more such states. Perhaps it is unlikely that a Japanese nuclear weapons effort would lead, say, Vietnam to seek them (though it probably would push South Korea in that direction). This is far from assured, however.

Today, relatively few states see active and serious debates about nuclear weapons. But if these weapons are increasingly seen as providing power, prestige, and protection (especially from neo-imperialist, nuclear-armed great powers in a more nationalist era), then it is logical more states could opt to arm. It is noteworthy that in December 2025 the Brazilian lower house of parliament rejected that country's ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (aka the Ban Treaty), an instrument it had previously championed and been the first country to sign. Lawmakers explicitly cited actions by nuclear-armed states to strengthen and expand their arsenals as justification for keeping Brazil's nuclear options open.[22]

Yet, the most obvious consequence of additional nuclear-armed states is the increased potential for nuclear weapons to be used. Even if the United States could limit proliferation to just a few select nuclear-armed allies—presumably functioning democracies with rational leaders—the odds of nuclear weapons being used would nevertheless grow. Accidents, miscalculations, or inadvertent acts already pose escalation risks, setting aside the manifest challenges of maintaining nuclear command and control amid very short decision timeframes and securing nuclear arsenals and materials against non-state actors.[23] More

weapons and more fissile material in more hands simply create more opportunities for things to go wrong.

Periodic debates about the rationality of nuclear-armed leaders reinforce this concern. In 2017, then-US national security advisor H.R. McMaster wondered, for instance, "Classical deterrence theory, how does that apply to a regime like the regime in North Korea? A regime that engages in unspeakable brutality against its own people?"[24] Concerns that an adversary leader may act irrationally or see nothing to lose from using nuclear weapons could incentivize preventive attacks and, by extension, put pressures on adversaries to launch nuclear weapons before they could be destroyed. Luck has been a major factor in preventing nuclear use in conflicts since 1945 and the world would need more of it with more nuclear-armed states.

> The most obvious consequence is the increased potential for nuclear weapons to be used

A closely related issue is whether proliferation could in fact be done selectively, limited only to the few friends that Washington wanted to possess nuclear weapons. This is a highly questionable proposition that cuts in two directions: First, if the United States were to tolerate proliferation by Germany, say, would Poland not also seek them? This dynamic could be especially acute in East Asia, given lingering historical tensions and regional rivalry that make South Korea and Japan frenemies.[25] Second, if the United States were aiding its allies to arm in order to solidify their help against common adversaries such as China, Russia, and North Korea, why should the adversaries then refrain from helping their friends to arm in return? Russia already has edged in this direction by deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus, for instance.[26] US fears of a coordinated nuclear attack by Russia and China also could be realized if those adversaries tightened their nuclear alignment in response to US-facilitated friendly proliferation.

US tolerance or, more critically, active support for friendly proliferation would also do gross damage to international anti-proliferation instruments. These long-standing regimes would be unlikely to survive the hypocrisy of one of their main architects willfully and grossly violating literally their first principle, enshrined in Article I of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): the commitment not to assist or encourage others to become nuclear-armed. If the United States violates its commitments to counter the power of China and Russia, whose compliance and enforcement is also necessary for nonproliferation regimes to function, this infrastructure would cease to be effective.

There is a tendency toward "whataboutism" to downplay the risks of limited proliferation to nonproliferation regimes, with citations of the numerous instances when great powers (including the United States) have bent, ignored,

or broken what are meant to be universal rules to satisfy narrower interests; yet the regimes still stand. The United States spearheaded the effort to exempt India from nuclear supply restrictions in the 2005 US-India civil nuclear agreement, and de facto accept Delhi's nuclear weapons possession following its 1998 nuclear tests despite it being outside the NPT. China supplied Pakistan's nuclear weapons program in the past and continues to support its nuclear energy program, in contravention of supply rules. Russia is suspected of providing technology and equipment for North Korea's nuclear and space programs in violation of several UN Security Council resolutions. All of these acts indeed undermine efforts to uphold nonproliferation, though they have not been fatal to the regimes, probably because they primarily concern non-NPT states (North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003). None of these exceptions signaled total defection from the principled commitment by the great powers to arresting proliferation. In today's geopolitical environment, however, tolerating friendly proliferation seems more likely to sharply erode continued adherence to nonproliferation regimes than these past episodes.

Undermining these institutions and their embedded norms while enhancing the perceived utility of nuclear weapons would also make it difficult to mount international responses to stop undesirable proliferation. The erosion or collapse of multilateral regimes, coupled with weakening enforcement through the United Nations, would leave the United States and potentially its friends more reliant on unilateral or small coalition counterproliferation actions. The primary tool that could be left for US policymakers would be the Massive Ordnance Penetrator that was used against Iran's underground facilities in June 2025. Though this weapon certainly caused a lot of damage, it did not foreclose Iran's nuclear weapons option. Without bodies to coordinate action, negotiate and enforce export controls on sensitive technologies, and inculcate transparency through international inspections and monitoring regimes, efforts to prevent further proliferation to all states, friendly and non-friendly alike, would become less effective, more costly, and carry much greater risk of war.

Finally, in a world that is home to more states with nuclear weapons or the ambitions to acquire them, the trust required to spread nuclear energy could be lost. Nuclear technology and materials are inherently dual-use, which is why possessors have established stringent conditions and strong safeguards for sharing them. It is worth recalling that the contemporary nuclear supply rules were built following India's violation of its peaceful uses commitments on nuclear technology and material provided by Canada to conduct its 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion." Loss of trust that countries would not abuse their NPT article IV "right" to nuclear technology and abide by their nonproliferation obligations could lead suppliers to pull back at a time when many new countries are eager to utilize nuclear power for energy security, carbon reduction, and economic

development. To a country like South Korea, which relies heavily on nuclear energy domestically and also aims to expand its nuclear reactor exports, new supply or sales restrictions levied against states seeking nuclear weapons could prove an economic double whammy.

Cleary, securitizing behavior by a few US allies in the form of nuclear weapons acquisition would have broad global effects. Even if the bargains enshrined in the NPT look increasingly hollow in the face of arsenal expansion by nuclear-armed states and weapons hedging by others, there continue to be strong reasons for all states to oppose further proliferation.

Friendly Proliferation Isn't Inevitable

When the Johnson administration set out to advance a broad nonproliferation policy in 1965, success was far from assured. Indeed, many Americans believed that further proliferation among US allies was inevitable. In a 1963 *Foreign Affairs* essay, future secretary of state Henry Kissinger wrote that "if Europe wishes to have a nuclear capability there is nothing we can do to prevent it."[27] Of course, in the Nixon and Ford administrations, Kissinger became one of the key architects of bilateral arms control with the Soviet Union and the entry into force of the NPT. These policies, combined with sharpened US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees to allies in Asia and Europe, effectively diminished the drivers of friendly proliferation for decades. Rather than being inevitable, the nuclear weapons aspirations of allies such as West Germany, Italy, Australia, the ROK, and Japan were contained, and non-allies Sweden, Switzerland, and Taiwan reversed.

Friendly proliferation is no less preordained today than it was in the 1960s

Today, friendly proliferation is no less preordained than it was in the 1960s. The United States and its allies have options to address contemporary security challenges short of nuclear arming. Given the serious risks that would accrue for all parties if any state crossed that threshold, the imperative should be to explore the full range of approaches short of proliferation, which would address allies' myriad security concerns and US political interests.

The drivers of allies' flirtation with nuclear weapons cannot be addressed in isolation. These calculations are inextricably linked to perceived threats from China, Russia, and North Korea on one side, and fears of US abandonment on the other. Staving off friendly proliferation will require policies that cover both angles, preferably as part of a strategy that leans into more comprehensive economic, energy, information, and security partnerships.[28] At a time when

the US-led alliance systems in Europe and Asia look shaky and transactionalism is the emergent alternative, this may sound pollyannaish or simply like a rehash of long-standing US policy—a fair point.

In the past, the United States was able to effectively coerce allies by threatening to withdraw security protections or impose economic sanctions if their weapons efforts proceeded.[29] Such US power has waned, and amid other US coercive economic and security behavior toward its allies, perceived threats of US defection are probably already priced into the nuclear calculus of US allies.[30] Nevertheless, it would be better for both Washington and friendly capitals to find offramps short of the fork in the road that would arrive if a US ally opted to proliferate. Creating those offramps requires that the United States and its allies ground discussions about future security in an honest, explicit, and transparent understanding of the contingent relationships between US security guarantees, economic cooperation, and allies' nonproliferation commitments. Leaders and publics need to affirm this quid pro quo and what it requires of both sides.

As it is, there are clear gaps in understanding around the consequences of friendly proliferation that must be bridged. For example, when then-South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol "reaffirmed the ROK's longstanding commitment to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty" in the April 2023 Washington Declaration with the United States, he was castigated by conservative Korean media for having "jettison[ed] South Korea's right to protect its sovereignty and people at a time when North Korea is repeatedly threatening to launch a nuclear attack against it."[31] This criticism, based on a view that South Korea has a "right" to nuclear weapons, notwithstanding its international and domestic legal obligations to eschew them, highlights the problems that wishful thinking about friendly proliferation feeds. In short, to foster more realistic consideration of the consequences and to avert the sense of inevitability that one or more US allies could opt for the bomb, it is in Washington's interest to be clear and unequivocal about what would follow such a decision.

Conclusion

Friendly proliferation is not a panacea for persistent frictions in US alliances or today's other security ills. If US friends acquired nuclear weapons with Washington's blessing, the resulting world wouldn't simply be today's world plus a few more friendly nuclear-armed states, it would be a profoundly different and more dangerous one for the United States and its friends. It is not in the long-term interests of US friends to build nuclear weapons. It is not in long-term US interests to enable friends to do so.

In 1965, Foster concluded, "In the light of such consequences of proliferation, we would seem justified in accepting rather large costs in an effort to prevent it. Of course, even our best efforts may not lead to success."[32] The same calculus holds today: the potential for failure is real, but that does not negate the strategic rationale for trying. Washington and its friends must aim for a more realistic approach to their collective security that better addresses adversary threats and mitigates risks of US abandonment. This approach may not fully succeed in stanching nuclear weapons interest, but it would be far cheaper and safer to try than to acquiesce to the further spread of the bomb.

It is not in the long-term interests of US friends or the US for US friends to build nuclear weapons

Notes

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