

## Why America's Allies Should Develop Nuclear Weapons

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Germans are losing their trust in America's security guarantees. Believing that U.S. troops would always defend Europe, Berlin has allowed its military outlays and capabilities to wither. German defense spending at present barely breaks 1 percent of GDP. With only slight overstatement, political scientist Christian Hacke recently said of the German military, "nothing flies, nothing floats, and nothing runs."

For years, Washington officials have whined about Europe's and especially Germany's failure to take defense seriously. Yet the U.S. also continued to spend money and deploy troops to "reassure" its allies, giving them less incentive to do more.

Despite his tough rhetoric, in practice, President Donald Trump's policy has proven to be more of the same. He criticized America's defense commitments to Montenegro, yet allowed it to enter NATO. At the latest alliance summit, his subordinates advanced new subsidies for member states. This year the administration is putting another \$6.5 billion into the European Deterrence Initiative, formerly called the European Reassurance Initiative.

Nevertheless, the president's crude hostility and unpredictability have set him apart from his predecessors. Thus, many Germans and other Europeans worry that he might walk away from NATO.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been particularly vocal. Last year she defiantly responded to President Trump's criticism by calling on Europeans to "take our fate into our own hands." She remains committed to bumping her country's military outlays up to 2 percent of GDP, despite opposition from her coalition partners.

Other Germans want to do even more. For instance, shortly after Trump's election, Roderich Kiesewetter, a member of the Bundestag and former German general staff officer, suggested creating a European military budget to expand the French and British nuclear arsenals. Berthold Kohler, publisher of the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, urged direct German support.

Two weeks ago, the *Welt am Sonntag* ran an article by Christian Hacke that argued Germany was no longer under America's nuclear umbrella and that "national defense on the basis of a nuclear deterrent must be given priority in light of new transatlantic uncertainties and potential

confrontations.” Criticism of his idea was fierce—a former intelligence official denounced it as “reckless, foolish, and incendiary.”

U.S. commentators also dumped on Hacke’s proposal. Jim Townsend, a one-time deputy defense secretary, argued: “Trump notwithstanding, the U.S. nuclear guarantee is not going anywhere.” That, of course, is the conventional wisdom inside the Blob, as the Washington foreign policy establishment has been called, which also believes that America must forever defend Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; fix failed societies and sort out foreign civil wars everywhere; and underwrite every authoritarian regime that claims to oppose Washington’s enemy du jour.

But it isn’t just the Germans who are considering nuclear options. Jarsolaw Kaczynski, former Polish prime minister and dominant figure in Poland’s current government, has suggested developing a European nuclear arsenal to confront Russia.

The same question also has arisen in Asia. The Republic of Korea embarked on a nuclear program in the 1970s after President Park Chung-hee doubted the Nixon administration’s commitment to the ROK’s defense. Seoul later abandoned the effort under U.S. pressure, though in recent years the North’s nuclear advances have fed popular support for a South Korean bomb. A poll found two thirds of South Koreans in favor and some newspapers and politicians offered their support.

North Korea’s new pacific course has reduced the perceived necessity of a nuclear arsenal and leftist President Moon Jae-in last fall declared, “We will not develop or possess nuclear weapons.” However, the future remains uncertain. Indeed, few Korea analysts believe Pyongyang will ever fully disarm, and President Trump has shown disdain for America’s defense commitment to South Korea.

Even more controversial is the case of Japan. The idea of possessing nuclear weapons remains anathema to much of the Japanese population, but they also remain sheltered beneath America’s nuclear umbrella. Despite Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s attempt to tie himself to President Trump, an increasingly burdened America may tire of protecting its wealthiest ally.

So far the proliferation door is “ajar, even if no one is leading the way through it,” observed Llewelyn Hughes of GR Japan. The idea of a Japanese nuke was studied (and rejected) by military and civilian policymakers as far back as the 1960s. During the conservative nationalist Abe’s earlier stint as prime minister a decade ago, he appeared to offer indirect support for a Japanese nuclear weapon, though nothing came of that gambit. In April 2016, Abe observed that the Japanese Constitution does not preclude the country from possessing and using nuclear bombs, which reaffirmed a position going back to Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi in 1957. The same reasoning allows Tokyo to field a “Self-Defense Force” despite the constitution’s Article Nine, which holds that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”

Most U.S. policymakers dismiss the idea of friendly proliferation in Asia, though analyst Ira Straus has proposed a nuclear loan by Washington to Japan and the ROK. Ultimately, however, there is no reason for the U.S. to remain entangled in those nations’ defense. Both are nuclear capable and could develop their own weapons if they desired. America should consider shifting—permanently, not temporarily—nuclear as well as conventional defense responsibilities onto its freeloading allies.

Uncle Sam has been profligate with his nuclear umbrellas. The 28 other NATO members—including Montenegro, President Trump's *bête noire*—each received one. So did Japan and South Korea. Australia and Taiwan could also be seen as protected. Certainly Israel would be had it not developed its own arsenal. Perhaps Saudi Arabia would get one if Iran developed a bomb. Ukraine probably thought it had one after yielding its leftover Soviet nukes.

The presumption is that America's commitments are costless since they will never be called in. Washington deters the bad guys while preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. Whatever risk might exist, believes the Blob, it's vastly exceeded by the dangers of proliferation. Under such assumptions, no wonder non-proliferation is one of foreign policy's great sacred cows.

The problem with our promises to use nukes on behalf of other nations is that doing so costs nothing only so long as deterrence holds. And history is full of conflicts in which conventional alliances failed to prevent war. World Wars I and II are prime examples.

A nuclear guarantee that failed at deterrence would force either military action likely to result in destruction on the American homeland or humiliating retreat and a consequent loss of credibility and honor. What U.S. cities should be held hostage for Berlin, Taipei, Podgorica, Tokyo, Warsaw, and Canberra? Only an interest most compelling could justify taking such a risk. Yet Washington has opened its nuclear umbrellas casually, even thoughtlessly, without much regard for the consequences.

In fact, most of America's nuclear guarantees are leftovers, tied to antiquated alliances created during a different time. But for those commitments, the U.S. would not be a nuclear target of so many opposing regimes. Through its alliances, Washington has needlessly turned itself into an adversary of nuclear-armed powers.

Hence last year's bizarre nuclear scare involving North Korea. No serious analyst believed the DPRK planned to start a nuclear war with America. Nothing suggested that any one of the three Kims who ruled the North were suicidal. Yet in the event of a conventional war, Pyongyang could still be tempted to either strike out in desperation or threaten attacks on civilian targets to halt an allied advance. With South Korea well able to defend itself, Washington is risking nuclear attack for no good reason.

The dangers are exacerbated by the potential impact of nuclear guarantees on allied behavior, which can encourage intransigence and even recklessness. Conventional commitments are dangerous enough. In the early 2000s, Taiwan's independence-minded Chen Shui-bian government appeared to provoke Beijing in the belief that the U.S. would deal with any consequences. In 2008, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili triggered a disastrous conflict with Russia, bombarding Moscow's troops in the breakaway territory of South Ossetia, apparently expecting Washington to enter any war on his government's side.

While friendly proliferation could create instability and encourage competing arms build-ups, it would also be the most effective way to constrain China without forcing the U.S. into a military confrontation over primarily allied interests with what will be soon a great power, perhaps eventually even a superpower. Enabling more nuclear states would be unfortunate, but it still might be the best among bad options.

If nothing else, Americans should debate Washington's multiple nuclear guarantees. Recipient nations increasingly recognize that the nuclear umbrella offers an imperfect defense at best. And

the U.S. government's nuclear commitments create enormous, disproportionate costs and risks for Americans. When the issue is nuclear war, without question America must come first.

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