



Letting US Asian allies get nukes is a bad idea

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A [recent article](#) by the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow in the prominent Washington-based journal Foreign Policy proposes that "America should let its Asian allies acquire nuclear weapons."

He defends this iconoclastic proposal by arguing that China is not a direct military threat to the US; the US is overcommitted both internationally and domestically; defending allies' claims to contested islands has little US public support; and such weapons would keep China's aggressiveness in check.

These reasons have some merit. But increasing the existential threat to humanity because of them is a very bad idea.

Bandow himself acknowledges that there would be widespread opposition to this proposal in the US and in the allied nations themselves. This is an understatement.

The risks he acknowledges would be prohibitive – "potential terrorism, nuclear accidents or [nuclear response to] geopolitical provocations" as well as proliferation and a mini-nuclear arms race. But Bandow dismisses them, arguing that "nations are convinced that modest [nuclear] arsenals keep rival states at bay," and cites Israel, North Korea and India as examples.

This may or may not be so – it is too early to tell. Moreover, it is not clear that in this age of cyberwarfare and international terrorism these states' enemies have been or will continue to be kept "at bay."

Regional historic hatreds could drive one or more states to threaten or actually use their nukes in a not uncommon paroxysm of nationalism – think South Korea-Japan. Indeed, that is one good reason the US has provided a nuclear umbrella over Japan, South Korea and Taiwan for all these years.

Where this idea really goes off the rails is when Bandow suggests that Japan "might warm to the idea if it were uncertain that the US would come to its defense." On the contrary, much of Japan's populace would recoil in horror from the thought of increasing the chance of being nuked again.

Moreover, a nuclear Japan is perhaps the region's worst nightmare – even worse than gradual domination by China – something that may happen economically and militarily anyway. Their memories of Japan's racist brutality during World War II are still palpable.

It is highly unlikely that China would sit idly by while its historic arch-enemy developed a nuclear weapon. It might well take a page out of the US playbook and launch a “preventive defensive” attack.

It also has many tools of persuasion at its disposal, such as economic sanctions and political and conventional military pressure. This is also a good reason China's neighbors would be hesitant to try to acquire nuclear arms with Washington's blessing, that and the fact that it would make them likely nuclear targets in any conflict between China and the US.

Most astounding is Bandow's suggestion that the US give Taiwan the weapon. This could well start – or end in – a nuclear exchange.

At one point Bandow argues that nuclear deterrence (of China) would work for US allies. But he then says in regard to the deterrence effect of America's nuclear umbrella that “history is littered with similar military and political presumptions, later shattered with catastrophic consequence.” Indeed, if implemented, that would be the likely fate of Bandow's proposal.

I agree with Bandow that US foreign policy in general and in Asia is between a rock and a hard place, overcommitment and the distractions of its domestic disarray. I also agree with his assertion that defending allies' contested interests are not “worth the resulting risks to America's homeland.” But there are other ways to address these problems without increasing the risk of a nuclear holocaust.

It would be better for the US to reconsider and revise its commitments. They are not “all or nothing.” In its defense treaties with the Philippines and with Japan, the parties undertake to settle disputes [with third parties] peacefully and “to refrain from the threat or use of force.”

Moreover, in the event of an attack, the US is not automatically obligated literally to “send the marines” but to “consult” and “act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and process.”

Further, “any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations” and “such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.”

These clauses provide some wiggle room for the US to finesse situations as they arise. US militarists and some allies may not like it, but it would be better for all concerned than allowing and even assisting them to acquire nukes.

As Bandow says, the implied US threat to use nuclear weapons in defense of its allies treats other nations' interests as existential for America. "That is not the case in today's potential East Asia-Pacific conflicts."

For example, China's claims and the conflicts in the South China Sea are not a direct threat to the US – unless it insists on making them so. They are only a theoretical threat in the minds of US militarist policy wonks. Should the US assist the spread of nuclear weapons in response to this theoretical threat?

Bandow says "proliferation would not be a good solution – but it might be the least bad one." But is the rapid spreading of nuclear arms to small states that could go "rogue" better than the US trying to finesse situations politically in which it otherwise might have to sacrifice blood and treasure for others' interests?

Washington got itself into this mess by foolishly over-committing to these countries' defense. Instead of reconsidering its opposition to "friendly proliferation," it should re-stress confidentially to its allies that its commitment to their defense is contingent on their not purposefully provoking China.

Moreover, it is contingent on an obvious direct planned attack – not a skirmish resulting from an isolated incident.

Further, the US should make clear that its assistance may take many forms such as material and intelligence support and not necessarily direct armed force. This way, a US ally would retain some of the benefits of the US deterrent without automatically committing the US to spend blood and treasure to defend that ally's contested far-flung islands and maritime resources or its purposefully provocative actions.

As Bandow says "additional nations choosing nukes would permanently transform the regional balance of power, to China's great disadvantage." Indeed, but I would add, "and to the existential disadvantage of the region and the world as well."

Rather than markedly increasing the existential threat to humanity, the US should try to finesse its commitments to allies and find a way for it and them to co-exist peacefully with China.