



Should Washington acquiesce to its allies developing nuclear weapons?

Doug Bandow

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Is Washington prepared to confront allies and friends who might decide to develop nuclear weapons? Should it do so?

Traditionally the U.S. has focused nonproliferation enforcement against perceived adversaries, most notably Iran and North Korea. Washington made half-hearted, and ultimately futile, efforts to prevent India and Pakistan from developing nuclear weapons.

The U.S. was less concerned about friendly governments. The United Kingdom developed an atomic arsenal early in the nuclear era; France and Israel followed. American officials never considered breaking relations or bombing proliferators.

However, Washington might soon face an ally or two moving down the nuclear road. Saudi Arabia has been the most vocal. Two years ago, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) bluntly insisted that if Iran "developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."

Riyadh's request to purchase nuclear plans from the U.S. looks like an attempt to create a turnkey nuclear program, ready to produce weapons at a moment's notice. The New York Times reported back in November, 2018 that MBS's "negotiators stirred more worries by telling the Trump administration that Saudi Arabia would refuse to sign an agreement that would allow United Nations inspectors to look anywhere in the country for signs that the Saudis might be working on a bomb."

The Kingdom is not the first U.S. ally to indicate an interest in possessing nuclear weapons. In the 1970s South Korean President Park Chung-hee, a general who seized power in a coup, initiated a nuclear program, which he abandoned only under great pressure. The idea has since resurfaced. Cheong Seong-chang, Director of the Unification Strategy Studies Program at the Sejong Institute, observed: "If we have nuclear weapons, we'll be in a much better position to deal with North Korea."

Some National Assembly members have backed the idea, as did Chung Mong-joon, heir to the Hyundai industrial group, chairman of the ruling party, and 2012 presidential candidate.

He urged the Republic of Korea to leave the nonproliferation treaty and “match North Korea’s nuclear progress step by step while committing to stop if North Korea stops.” A Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey last year found a majority of South Koreans backed the idea of developing nuclear weapons.

Despite the obvious obstacles to such a development, former South Korean foreign minister Song Min-soon warned that one “widely touted” response to the North was “the Republic of Korea taking its own measures to create a nuclear balance on the peninsula.” Byong-Chul Lee of Kyungnam University’s Institute for Far Eastern Studies and former special assistant to the National Assembly Speaker, suggested that “If these trends continue, a nuclear South Korea is a question of ‘when,’ not ‘if.’”

There is less overt support for exercising the nuclear option in Japan. Nevertheless, the idea has been suggested from time to time by senior officials. Indeed, more than 40 years ago Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda argued that Article 9 — the clause in Japan’s Constitution that outlaws war as a means of settling international disputes — does not “absolutely prohibit” the country from possessing nuclear weapons. Three years ago Shigeru Ishiba — one-time secretary general of the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party, defense minister, and prime minister hopeful — declared that “Japan should have the technology to build a nuclear weapon if it wants to do so” and that North Korea had made a debate over the issue inevitable.

Another potential nuclear aspirant is Germany. When West Germany rearmed and joined NATO, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer advocated relying on U.S. tactical nuclear weapons but suggested creating the capability to make German warheads. That idea has remained dormant for decades. However, the perception of an increased Russian threat has spurred concern for enhancing Europe’s nuclear deterrence, perhaps by creating a German deterrent.

After Donald Trump’s election, Roderich Kiesewetter, a Christian Democrat and Bundestag leader on foreign policy, opined that “Europe needs to think about developing its own nuclear deterrent.” He proposed a joint European military budget to finance a Franco-British nuclear umbrella: “If the United States no longer wants to provide this guarantee, Europe still needs nuclear protection for deterrent purposes.” However, there are forthright advocates of a German nuclear arsenal, such as Berthold Kohler, a publisher of the leading conservative paper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Academic. Henrik Mueller, an opponent of the idea, acknowledged that if America’s nuclear guarantee ended, then “Even a debate about indigenous German nuclear weapons would then be conceivable.”

These disparate countries all realize that America’s promise of so-called extended deterrence is growing less credible. There is less reason to defend allies able to defend themselves and no longer threatened by a hegemonic competitor of the United States. More important, the potential of additional nations targeting the U.S. homeland raises the costs of promising to protect allies. Mira Rapp-Hooper, senior fellow for Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations noted: “The trouble is, the United States has far less incentive to intervene on behalf of South Korea or Japan if North Korea can respond with a nuclear strike against the U.S. homeland.”

During the Cold War, Washington did its best to convince both the Europeans and Soviets that it was prepared to risk the incineration of American cities to protect European cities.

However, noted Rapp-Hooper: “Few of the assurance strategies the United States used with

NATO are available for contemporary Asia.” And those arguments don’t work as well even for Europe today, since Moscow no longer poses a globe-spanning hegemonic and ideological threat to the U.S.

Confidence in Washington’s promises has waned further with the Trump presidency. Even some members of his administration recognize the challenge. In September Stephen Biegun, then special representative for North Korea, now deputy secretary of state, asked “at what point will voices in South Korea or Japan and elsewhere in Asia begin to ask if they need to be considering their own nuclear capabilities?” The answer, of course, is they already are.

This is widely seen as a problem. Journalist Pete McKenzie observed that as America decides on President Trump’s reelection, “the answer it chooses may require it to confront a newly pressing nuclear challenge: holding back its friends.”

But why hold them back? Or at least all of them? Proliferation risks the use of nuclear weapons, both intentional and accidental. The more states with nukes the greater the likelihood of leakage to non-state actors. Nevertheless, the nations currently possessing nuclear weapons have made minimal efforts to disarm even as they attempt to keep the nuclear club’s door closed. They obviously believe the benefits of possessing nukes exceed the costs.

Moreover, for more than seven decades, Washington’s alternative to proliferation has been a growing number of nuclear umbrellas, many explicit, some implicit, and a few ambiguous. South Korea and Japan are in the first category, but the Europeans dominate. Every NATO expansion theoretically increases Washington’s nuclear obligations: now Americans are pledging to risk their nation’s incineration to protect North Macedonia. Before that was Montenegro. Next up might be the Duchy of Grand Fenwick.

The second category introduces uncertainty. Israel, presumably, is covered, though it has its own nuclear force. Maybe Saudi Arabia. The third category includes Taiwan and Australia. New Zealand, less so, since it left ANZUS. Perhaps the other Gulf states? What would Washington do if they confronted a nuclear power.

Nuclear deterrence works well for the American homeland. The further it extends the weaker it becomes. Protecting allies is less important than protecting the U.S., which is put at risk by opening a nuclear umbrella. Some allies are less important than other ones: compare Japan with Bahrain. At some point the threat to use nuclear weapons loses credibility to potential aggressors, especially in controversies of much greater interest to other states — such as Taiwan to China.

A nuclear umbrella also encourages allied states to take greater risks in the belief that Washington will back them. And if deterrence fails, America’s unpleasant choices are abandoning a commitment by staging a humiliating retreat or suffering likely retaliation after initiating nuclear strikes. Indeed, the U.S. would even face the risk of a preemptive strike to prevent or limit Washington’s threatened retaliation.

Saudi Arabia may be the best case against proliferation. The regime is totalitarian, murderous, and aggressive. It invaded Yemen, kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister, funded jihadist insurgents in Syria, promoted civil war in Libya, and backed repressive regimes in Bahrain and Egypt. MbS, who effectively rules, is impulsive, irresponsible, and brutal, having increased political repression, closing the once small space open for political dissent. Untrustworthy today,

the regime likely would be even more unpredictable and dangerous if it possessed nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, North Korea makes the case for counter-proliferation. In 1950 the North attacked South Korea. The U.S. intervened and was on the brink of victory by the end of the year. Then the People's Republic of China joined the fray and the war raged until July 1953, ending in an unsatisfactory ceasefire roughly where the fighting started.

If war erupted today, Beijing would not come to North Korea's rescue. But because Pyongyang has nuclear weapons, it could threaten to strike unless America withdrew from North Korean territory. And the North's regime would have nothing to lose in doing so, since total defeat would be the alternative. Under what circumstance could Washington risk intervening in a second Korean War, which would pose no direct threat to the United States, if the incineration of U.S. cities was the possible, even likely, result?

More seriously, does Washington want to forever be in a possible nuclear standoff with China in Asia? Assume Beijing amasses a nuclear arsenal equal to America's, would a U.S. president risk Los Angeles for Taipei, as a Chinese general once challenged an American official? Or for Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, Sydney, and Auckland? Even if the risk is small, how much risk of existential destruction should Washington take for the independence of friendly but not essential states. Especially knowing that China has a greater interest in its region than the U.S. does, and Beijing authorities, knowing that, might dismiss the likelihood of the nuclear umbrella being opened.

A sensible alternative might be measured proliferation. The U.S. always has accepted, sometimes formally, sometimes informally, the growth of the nuclear club. But others have won America's opposition. Today Washington could reasonably oppose Saudi Arabia while accepting Germany and South Korea, for instance.

A good solution, no, but only second bests exist. The U.S. government's chief responsibility is to its people. Doing more to protect others while endangering Americans is bad policy. Allowing, if not necessarily encouraging, others to build their own deterrent, would help constrain China. The impacts would be many, but the issue deserves to be debated rather than dismissed. The other options look worse.

Washington has found it difficult enough — meaning almost impossible — to prevent hostile regimes from developing nuclear weapons. It should not waste time trying to stop allies from doing so. To the contrary, friendly proliferation might be the best strategy to constrain dangerous powers in the future without risking U.S. involvement in multiple unnecessary wars.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.