

## As Nuclear Weapons Spread, US Should Close its Nuclear Umbrellas

Doug Bandow

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The United States collects military allies like most people accumulate Facebook friends. Washington's most recent acquisitions in Europe are Montenegro and North Macedonia, neither of which counts as a major power. Some wags suggest that the Duchy of Grand Fenwick of *The Mouse That Roared* fame will be the next NATO inductee.

Becoming a formal ally is almost always a good deal, even for a country with minimal military capacity. For instance, Montenegro's total active-duty force numbers 2,350. North Macedonia's is 8,000. If someone must stop Russia's revived Red Army, it won't be them. However, Podgorica and Skopje now get to sit at the adult's table in Brussels, receive aid for their military efforts, and parade about as nominal members of what is widely acclaimed as "the most successful alliance in world history."

Moreover, these military midgets enjoy the protection of America's nuclear arsenal.

That's worth more than a moment of reflection. Because as World War II ended, the Soviet Union deployed a larger army than did the United States. Instead, Washington relied on its nuclear superiority to defend Europe. The US threatened to respond to a conventional attack with nuclear weapons. That doctrine spread to Asia, where Washington was understood to back its allies—Japan and South Korea at least, maybe Australia too—with nukes.

These threats generally were believable. After all, Washington had just fought in World War II to liberate Western Europe from Nazi Germany. And the US believed preventing any hostile power from dominating Eurasia to be a vital interest. So Moscow could not dismiss America's warning that conventional attack might trigger nuclear war.

Threatening to use nukes to back Japan also seemed simple enough, since no one was threatening to attack Japan, with conventional or nuclear weapons. Although the Korean peninsula was dangerous, North Korea then had no nuclear weapons. And neither China nor the Soviet Union was inclined to go to nuclear war for the North. So Washington could threaten North Korean forces with nukes with little risk.

US policy remained unchanged throughout the Cold War. No one bothered to ask whether Washington's commitments were worth the risk of nuclear war, because no one imagined it would come to that. Yet NATO's 1983 Able Archer military exercise came uncomfortably

close to triggering a nuclear crisis because Moscow feared the US and its allies were using the military exercise to disguise a preventive war.

The end of the Cold War dramatically reduced the risks of nuclear conflict. However, dangers have been increasing over the last couple of decades. The expansion of NATO to Russia's border and other offenses have roiled allied relations with Russia. Today Washington is as much obligated to use nuclear weapons to protect Montenegro and North Macedonia as Germany and France.

But expansion is not over. Much of the Blob, as the foreign policy elite is known, wants NATO to keep growing. Today Ukraine, never a security interest of America, is backed by a veritable army of activists in DC seeking to push it into the transatlantic alliance and win the coveted Article 5 security commitment. That would include coverage by Washington's nuclear umbrella. Imagine today's burgeoning crisis over Russian military threats against Kyiv if the latter was in NATO and calling its allies for direct support.

China's rapid growth has turned it into an Asia-Pacific military power which unfortunately has territorial squabbles with Japan and the Philippines, both with treaty commitments from the United States. Almost everyone recognizes the importance of Japan, which even today possesses the world's third largest economy. However, no one believes that Beijing hopes to conquer the Japanese nation. Rather, the slow-burning fuses to war are conflicting maneuvers over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, uninhabited rocks which offer ownership over surrounding hydrocarbons and fish, and control over surrounding waters and airspace.

If war erupts between Beijing and Tokyo it will be over rocks such as these, with US nuclear weapons theoretically at the ready to back Japan. In the Pacific, both the Philippines and Japan expect the US to protect such geographic bits hither and yon while refusing to make a serious effort to defend themselves. Imagine ending up exchanging nuclear fire because China and Japan got into a heated argument over whose ship was responsible for a high sea collision. Thankfully, the likelihood is small, but even that is too high.

Even more threatening, however, is the growth of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. A succession of US presidents have solemnly intoned that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea cannot be allowed to have nuclear weapons. But it does. A lot of them.

When the DPRK was a non-nuclear power, the nuclear umbrella seemed like a good bet, since neither of Pyongyang's nominal allies ever offered a nuclear match to the US. For Beijing and Moscow the stakes just weren't important enough.

Now the DPRK has developed an arsenal which though small could wreak havoc on the region and the American homeland. The Center for the National Interest's Harry Kazianis pointed to war game results: "There was no question millions of people would die—it was just a question of how many." And that number will only grow alongside North Korean nuclear capabilities.

In recent years intelligence estimates as to Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal topped out around 60 or 65. The DPRK also was thought capable of adding another dozen weapons a year. Compounding

the threat is the fact that the North continues to improve and expand missiles upon which to put its nukes.

However, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's nuclear wish lists look like the script from a horror movie. Moreover, the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute recently concluded "that, by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons. The ROK and the United States are not prepared, and do not plan to be prepared, to deal with the coercive and warfighting leverage that these weapons would give North Korea."

That would put the North roughly equal with the United Kingdom, ahead of Pakistan, India, and Israel, and in the same broad range as France and China. Pyongyang would be able to simultaneously attack South Korea, Northeast Asia, and the US homeland.

The US nuclear umbrella could not survive such a deluge. Washington would still deter any attack without purpose. Contra their reputation, all three ruling Kims have been rational actors who played a weak hand well. None appeared interested in disappearing from the earth atop a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang.

However, facing military defeat in a conventional war, the North could threaten to resort to nukes unless the US backed off. Imagine a situation like October 1950, with US and South Korean troops advancing toward the Yalu River and preparing to erase the DPRK from the earth. Then Beijing intervened, saving the North Korean regime. That wouldn't happen this time, but Kim Jong-un could threaten to use his full arsenal unless Washington withdrew its forces. What President would risk losing major American cities and suffering millions of casualties?

The US assumes that nothing bad will happen because nothing bad has happened, despite some close calls along the way. But the risks are growing. More countries are covered by America's nuclear umbrellas. And more potential foes are better armed, ready to risk conflict. Including, in the case of North Korea, with an ever-increasing number of nuclear weapons.

Rather than continuing policy-as-usual, Washington should begin dismantling its nuclear umbrellas. The US should give its friends time to adapt. Some allied states might want to develop their own deterrents. Others might ally with other nuclear powers. Friendly governments also might look to create effective non-nuclear deterrents.

However, Washington should abandon its policy of holding its national homeland and civilian population hostage for the security of other governments. Friendly proliferation might not be desirable. That's not the right issue, however. The current system is growing more dangerous for America. It is time to shift policy before the US is expected to fight a nuclear war on behalf of someone else.