The election of Donald J. Trump challenged some long-held core tenets of U.S. foreign policy. For decades, U.S. administrations have valued the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons among their most important foreign policy goals. At the same time, Washington has expanded its global influence by extending robust security guarantees to numerous countries around the globe. Finally, the United States has established strategic stability vis-à-vis its nuclear adversaries by relying heavily on the doctrine of deterrence. These three policies, as the analysis below will show, are deeply connected. Security assurances to allies, combined with a focus on deterring—rather than rolling back—adversary regimes, have long been among the most effective tools in Washington’s nuclear nonproliferation toolkit. The limited spread of nuclear weapons that resulted from these policies, in turn, has made it possible for the United States to expand its global influence and achieve its broader strategic goals at relatively low cost, avoiding major wars against nuclear adversaries and exercising a great deal of influence over its protégés.

Intent on breaking with past practice, the Trump administration has questioned the wisdom of U.S. security commitments to allies around the world, all the while escalating its rhetoric with nuclear adversaries. Both these moves undermine long-standing policies aimed at avoiding nuclear proliferation toward U.S. allies. If fully implemented, a U.S. strategy that would decrease the level of U.S. commitment to the security of its allies while increasing the aggressiveness of U.S. goals vis-à-vis...
nuclear adversaries would likely lead to a cascade of nuclear proliferation that, in turn, would severely undermine U.S. influence and security.

These changes in U.S. foreign policy are most visible in Northeast Asia. As a candidate, Trump complained that South Korea and Japan should do more to shoulder the burdens of their own defense, suggesting that he may even accept their acquisition of nuclear weapons. Since the election, the Trump administration has vigorously escalated its rhetoric vis-à-vis North Korea, threatening it with grave consequences should it continue with its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

This break with past U.S. diplomatic practice increases the risks of both nuclear proliferation and military conflict, and can seriously undermine U.S. security interests as well as its broader influence in Northeast Asia. In turn, lower U.S. influence in East Asia would undercut Washington’s ability to influence the trajectory of China’s rise, perhaps the most important factor shaping the long-term global security landscape. By asking its allies to do more for their defense, sowing doubts about its commitment to their security, and threatening unilateral escalation against their North Korean adversary—risking a conflict that could have catastrophic consequences for South Korea and Japan—Washington may induce its East Asian allies to consider their own independent nuclear arsenal as a more reliable way to ensure their security. This in turn would lead to a regional nuclear arms race, decreasing U.S. influence over Tokyo’s and Seoul’s decision making, reducing U.S. control over escalatory dynamics in future crises in the Korean peninsula, threatening a major regional war, and ultimately increasing the risk that Washington would be dragged into an unwanted conflict of grave proportions.

The Strategic Roots of Nuclear Proliferation

To better grasp the risks involved in shifting U.S. strategy in Northeast Asia, it is important to understand the conditions under which states acquire nuclear weapons, and the effectiveness of different nonproliferation or counterproliferation measures. Standard security-based approaches to explaining nuclear proliferation tend to take a pessimistic view of nonproliferation efforts. If countries face serious security threats, the traditional view goes, they will become keen on obtaining nuclear weapons, and there is little that other states can do to prevent their nuclearization. Such arguments tend to overpredict proliferation, however. There are far more states in the world facing serious security threats than the number of states that have actually acquired nuclear weapons.
In our book *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation*, we analyze proliferation dynamics by placing them in their strategic context, studying the relation between potential proliferators, their adversaries and (whenever present) their allies.\(^4\) We conclude that, fortunately, the conditions under which proliferation occurs are relatively rare—a powerful country like the United States can often successfully prevent proliferation by deploying the appropriate foreign policy tools.

Certainly, a state acquires nuclear weapons only when it perceives that the atomic bomb would improve its security. The existence of a serious security threat that would be mitigated by a nuclear arsenal is a necessary condition for proliferation. Unthreatened countries do not “go nuclear.” For example, Brazil long had a nuclear program, which the United States suspected of having a military dimension. Yet, without a foreign security threat, Brasilia simply lacked the willingness to acquire nuclear weapons, and never built the bomb. To the contrary, once it mastered the nuclear fuel cycle, thereby ensuring its autonomy in the nuclear realm, Brasilia soon sought to join the global nuclear nonproliferation regime.\(^5\)

At the same time, security concerns are not sufficient for proliferation. Wanting the bomb is not enough to actually get it. While a country pursues its nuclear weapons, it may be targeted by counterproliferation military action—or it may yield to the threat of such action. Such threats can take many forms. For example, adversaries can use economic sanctions, backed by the threat of military action, to compel potential proliferators to limit their nuclear weapons programs.\(^6\) This suggests that states with stronger conventional capabilities prior to their nuclearization should be more successful in acquiring the bomb. An effective preventive counterproliferation strike against them would be costlier, and therefore less likely to make sense for their adversaries. Weaker states, on the contrary, are vulnerable to counterproliferation military action, and therefore more likely to be targeted or coerced into stopping their nuclear efforts. Given the might of the Red Army in the aftermath of World War II, Stalin could boast in public about the Soviet Union’s effort to build nuclear weapons, arguing that the U.S. nuclear monopoly was dead even before the first Soviet nuclear test of August 1949. By contrast, weaker states like Syria and Iraq have seen their nuclear weapons programs thwarted by military action.\(^7\) While nuclear weapons are the weapons of the weak, the weak are highly unlikely to get them.

The threat of a military counterproliferation strike by an adversary is not the only way of ensuring that a state remains nonnuclear, however. Powerful countries can prevent the spread of nuclear weapons by extending guarantees of protection over states that face serious security threats, and making these guarantees conditional on the protégé remaining nonnuclear. These alliance dynamics are at the core of concerns about additional proliferation in East Asia today, by Japan and South Korea specifically, and worth examining in greater detail.
The consequences of alliances on proliferation are complex. Guarantees of protection by a security sponsor have two countervailing effects on the odds of the protégé acquiring nuclear weapons. On the one hand, protection may satiate a protégé’s security needs and eliminate its willingness to spend resources building the bomb. On the other hand, protection during a period of nuclear pursuit increases the costs of a counterproliferation strike by a third state, augmenting the initial state’s opportunity to proliferate. Which of these two effects trumps the other—leading to nuclear forbearance or, conversely, to proliferation—depends on the relative power of the potential proliferator vis-à-vis its adversaries.

States that are relatively weak vis-à-vis their adversaries in terms of conventional military power would benefit a great deal from a nuclear arsenal, and will thus be keen to obtain nuclear weapons, but would lack the opportunity to do so, on their own, given the credible threat of a counterproliferation strike. In these cases, the presence of a security sponsor may actually improve a state’s prospects in building the bomb. At the same time, relative weakness exposes these potential proliferators to threats of abandonment by their powerful allies. If left on their own, weak states could be the target of a counteproliferation strike, and would thus have no opportunity to build the bomb. Therefore, allies that can credibly threaten to abandon them will likely be able to deter their proliferation as long as they can detect the protégé’s nuclear development efforts. This dynamic accounts for why Taiwan gave up its nuclear efforts twice—in the late 1970s and again in the late 1980s. In both cases, Taipei’s nuclear forbearance was the result of U.S. threats of abandonment, which would place the island in a dangerous situation in relation to a far more powerful China. In short, threats of abandonment (or decreased protection) are, perhaps surprisingly, wise nonproliferation tools vis-à-vis relatively weak protégés.

In contrast, states that are stronger relative to their adversaries would have the opportunity to build the bomb even if abandoned by their allies. In these cases, a security sponsor will only be able to ensure that its protégé remains nonnuclear by providing credible security guarantees that mitigate the protégé’s security threats. Threats of abandoning a protégé that would retain the opportunity to nuclearize even without protection would only whet its appetite for building an autonomous nuclear arsenal. This dynamic accounts for why in the early 1980s, as we discuss further below, the United States ultimately reassured South Korea about U.S. security guarantees in order to ensure Seoul would renounce an autonomous nuclear arsenal. In sum, threats of abandonment (or decreased protection) are unwise nonproliferation tools vis-à-vis relatively strong protégés.
Furthermore, the strength of the commitment of the security sponsor affects the credibility of its assurances. Should a security sponsor such as the United States engage in reckless behavior vis-à-vis an adversary it has in common with its protégés—e.g., North Korea—U.S. allies might conclude that they face a great risk of entrapment, and their security would be better ensured if they could remove themselves from their alliance with the United States. This would increase their willingness to build an autonomous nuclear deterrent. The goal of nuclear nonproliferation conflicts with a U.S. strategy that entails a considerable risk of starting a war against a nuclear-armed adversary such as North Korea.

Summing up our argument, nuclear proliferation only takes place in relatively rare conditions. To acquire the bomb, a state must perceive that nuclear weapons would significantly improve its security, yet it must also be able to deter an effective counterproliferation strike. This means that while their nuclear weapons program are underway, potential proliferators are vulnerable to foreign pressures by adversaries and allies. Weak states are exposed to counterproliferation strikes by adversaries and, therefore, also sensitive to threats of abandonment by allies. Strong states are relatively more immune to counterproliferation strikes by adversaries and, therefore, hardly coercible by allied threats of abandonment. In their case, only allies can stymie proliferation by issuing robust security guarantees, often involving deployments of troops and even nuclear weapons, and behaving consistently in ways that respect the security interests of the protégés.

Northeast Asia: Its Nuclear Past and Unclear Future

As the security sponsor of Japan and South Korea—countries that would, as we argue below, retain the ability to build their own nuclear weapons even if Washington abandoned them—the United States can most effectively prevent proliferation in East Asia by continuing to extend robust security guarantees to Tokyo and Seoul. These guarantees should be coupled with U.S. behavior that does not place their security interests at risk, thereby obviating their need for an independent deterrent. A U.S. policy that either questions Washington’s security guarantees to Japan, as well as South Korea, or generates a serious risk of war with North Korea—let alone one that does both—is likely to lead Tokyo and Seoul to contemplate the benefits of an autonomous nuclear arsenal, while deepening Pyongyang’s view that nuclear weapons are essential to its regime’s survival.

The U.S. can most effectively prevent proliferation to Tokyo and Seoul by security guarantees.
In the last three decades, U.S. nonproliferation policy in Northeast Asia has centered on three states: North Korea, South Korea, and Japan. By the time the Trump administration entered office, North Korea had long crossed the nuclear threshold. South Korea and Japan, for their part, had no active nuclear weapons program, reassured that the United States would come to their defense in the event of a conflict. By choosing a muscular approach against North Korea and sowing doubts about the reliability of its assurances to South Korea and Japan, the Trump administration is significantly increasing the risks of military conflict and additional proliferation.

**North Korea**

Since taking office, President Trump has used aggressive rhetoric vis-à-vis North Korea, apparently aimed at preventing the development of the North’s intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities and achieving the reversal of its nuclear status. In January 2017, Trump responded to the threat of an imminent ICBM deployment by the North by declaring “It won’t happen!” The following August, the president announced that he would unleash “fire and fury” against North Korea if it threatened the United States. One month later, speaking at the United Nations, Trump “vowed to ‘totally destroy North Korea’ if it threatened the United States.” Then, in October 2017, Trump tweeted that he had told Secretary of State Rex Tillerson “that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man,” a reference to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, adding an ominous “we’ll do what has to be done!” To evaluate the odds that the Trump administration’s aggressive approach to North Korea will result in the reversal of Pyongyang’s advances in missile technology or, more ambitiously, in the reversal of North Korea’s nuclear status, we need to understand the strategic causes of North Korea’s nuclear acquisition.

North Korea began its nuclear program in the 1960s. During its first three decades, its efforts made relatively little progress. Pyongyang could ensure the survival of its regime and the territorial integrity of the North by relying on its conventional artillery, which was able to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire” if war broke out. But as U.S. precision targeting capabilities were made apparent in the Gulf War of early 1991—and as the Soviet Union collapsed and China pursued a course of modernization and economic opening, making the North’s powerful allies anything but reliable—Pyongyang increased its nuclear commitment.

Fortunately for its aims, the North was able to deter any counterproliferation military action, as its conventional artillery remained highly destructive. When tensions flared up in the Korean peninsula over the North’s nuclear program in 1994, South Korean president Kim Young-sam told a Clinton administration seemingly willing to countenance war: “The Korean peninsula must never
become a battlefield. If war breaks out, a large number of servicemen and civilians would be killed both in the South and in the North; the economy would be totally devastated; and foreign capital would fly away. U.S. officials similarly took a grim view of the prospect of conflict on the Korean peninsula. The United States and South Korea would likely defeat North Korea, but the problem was the high cost in human lives. A war game at the time had placed the level of casualties between 300,000 and 750,000 in military personnel alone. In 1999, Secretary of Defense William J. Perry acknowledged the lack of viable U.S. military options, reporting to Congress that “deterrence of war on the Korean Peninsula is stable on both sides.”

As North Korea rushed toward the nuclear threshold, the George W. Bush administration renounced a policy of engagement. President Bush included North Korea as a member of the “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address in January 2002 and, the following October, Washington accused Pyongyang of pursuing a clandestine uranium enrichment program. Considering the concept of deterrence and its reliance on defensive forces inadequate in dealing with “rogue” regimes, Washington contemplated more aggressive foreign policy options, including regime change. But once again, any U.S. policy that increased the risk of war was met with skepticism in Seoul. As then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice later put it, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung “simply wanted to avoid conflict with Kim Jong-il at any cost.”

Given the particularly high expected cost of a counterproliferation strike, North Korea continued to develop its nuclear weapons unabated. In October 2006, Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test; five more followed, up to a supposed hydrogen bomb test in September 2017. Today, North Korea is believed to have assembled between 10-20 nuclear weapons, and to have enough fissile material for 30-60 nuclear weapons. It is also working hard on delivery means that could put a warhead in the continental United States. In sum, Pyongyang acquired nuclear weapons in order to ensure the long-term reliability of its deterrent vis-à-vis the U.S.-South Korea coalition, given that the North Korean conventional artillery deterrent on which it had relied theretofore was threatened by the evolution of U.S. precision targeting technology and the shifting trajectory of the North’s traditional allies.

Will the Trump administration’s more aggressive strategy—and its concomitant higher risk of war in the Korean peninsula—succeed in stopping North Korea’s missile development or coercing Pyongyang into denuclearizing? In all likelihood, the answer is no. The challenge for such a U.S. approach is that military options are even more costly now than before the North’s nuclear acquisition. A conflict with North Korea, although it would likely result in a U.S. victory, would likely cost tens of thousands of casualties in South Korea in the first hours alone, if not more, due to the North’s conventional artillery and, possibly, its use of
nuclear weapons. Japanese lives would also be at stake, given the North’s missile capability. These exceedingly high costs curtail Washington’s ability to credibly threaten war and thus coerce Pyongyang into accepting U.S. policy goals.

To the contrary, the Trump administration’s threats may have led North Korea to accelerate its production of nuclear warheads and its efforts to place one on a reliable ICBM. Pyongyang tested its first ICBM on July 4, 2017, and conducted several other such tests since. Given the security logic underpinning North Korea’s nuclear arsenal and missile program—namely the need to threaten its regional adversaries and, if possible, also the United States with catastrophic costs should they attack the North—it is exceedingly unlikely that the North will stop its missile program and give up its nuclear arsenal. This more aggressive U.S. policy is arguably entrenching Pyongyang’s views about the high value of its nuclear deterrent and its ability to retaliate directly against U.S. territory. As a result, we are likely to see accelerated vertical proliferation—i.e., the production of greater numbers of nuclear weapons and missiles—by North Korea.

While likely failing to achieve its goals vis-à-vis North Korea, the Trump administration’s muscular approach to the Korean peninsula also entails the risk that Seoul and Tokyo will see their American ally as an erratic giant that has become a liability to South Korean and Japanese security. Given the expected catastrophic costs for these two allies of a U.S. war against North Korea, perceived U.S. willingness to countenance—and perhaps even start—such a war will likely result in Seoul and Tokyo becoming more willing to acquire their own nuclear arsenals. As we will see in the next two sections, when combined with the Trump administration’s questioning of U.S. security commitments to these two core East Asian allies, Washington’s perceived recklessness in dealing with Pyongyang has great potential for starting a proliferation cascade that would destabilize international security in East Asia and well beyond.

South Korea

In its first year in office, the Trump administration’s rhetoric has often included two positions that contrast with previous U.S. policy. First, as we discussed above, Washington has pursued more aggressive rhetoric vis-à-vis North Korea, heightening the risk of war in the Korean peninsula, and thereby placing Seoul under the shadow of potential catastrophic damage. Second, President Trump has questioned the wisdom of maintaining tens of thousands of U.S. troops
stationed in South Korean soil, and is keen on demanding that its Asian allies contribute more for their own security. (For example, Trump has suggested that Seoul should pay for the recently-deployed THAAD advanced missile-defense system.23) If implemented, these changes in U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula would decrease the reliability of the United States as a security sponsor. Consequently, they would increase the odds that Seoul would acquire its own nuclear arsenal.

To understand why South Korea might be tempted to proliferate in response to these changes in U.S. strategy, we need to understand the historical role of U.S. security assurances in deterring Seoul’s nuclear ambitions. South Korea seriously considered developing nuclear weapons starting in the late 1960s, precisely in response to a policy shift in Washington not unlike the one the Trump administration seems to be contemplating. In 1969, President Richard Nixon announced his new Asia policy, the so-called Guam Doctrine. The aim was to limit U.S. military engagements in the region.24 Shortly thereafter, Washington withdrew around 20,000 troops—a third of its total deployment—from South Korea.25 This shift raised considerable fears of abandonment in Seoul, especially as it came simultaneously with U.S. attempts to engineer a rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China, the North’s main ally.26

Seoul’s response was to deepen its interest in nuclear weapons, with President Park publicly calling for a “self-reliant national defense,”27 which included the secret development of a “super weapon.”28 The Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute was tasked with acquiring reprocessing capabilities, and the covert Weapons Exploitation Committee, responsible for the procurement and production of nuclear weapons, was created.29 By 1973, South Korea was seeking to acquire reprocessing and missile capabilities.30

Washington’s first response was to signal that U.S. security assurances were conditional on Seoul remaining nonnuclear. This pressure led Seoul to ratify the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1975. Yet South Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons subsisted. At the time, President Park publicly tied the South’s nuclear forbearance with provision of reliable U.S. security guarantees. Speaking to Washington Post reporters on June 26, 1975, he stated: “If South Korea were not provided with a U.S. nuclear umbrella, South Korea would do anything to protect its security, including the development of nuclear weapons.”31

Once President Jimmy Carter took office in early 1977, fears of U.S. abandonment again prompted renewed South Korean interest in nuclear weapons. Carter’s proposed South Korean policy involved cuts in military aid, withdrawing all U.S. ground troops from the peninsula, and removing 1,000 tactical nuclear weapons from the country.32 Seoul’s nuclear aspirations were only definitively put to rest—at least until now—when in 1981, the Reagan administration promised to
restore and reaffirm the United States’ long-standing security commitment to South Korea if the country would terminate its nuclear ambitions in the military realm. Faced with reassuring signs from Washington, President Doo-hwan Chun (1980-88) canceled the South’s nuclear program altogether.\textsuperscript{33}

Since then, South Korea has remained firmly under the U.S. security umbrella. More recently, in reaction to the first North Korean nuclear test of October 2006, the term “extended nuclear deterrence” was, at the South’s request, added to the joint communiqué issued by South Korea and the United States at the end of their annual Security Consultative Meetings.\textsuperscript{34} In sum, South Korea’s close alliance with the United States has been a key factor in thwarting Seoul’s willingness to develop nuclear weapons. When this commitment appeared to weaken in the past, Seoul considered building an independent nuclear arsenal. Given South Korea’s economic and technological capabilities, plus the technical difficulty and high costs entailed in a hypothetical counterproliferation strike by the North, Seoul would have a good chance of succeeding in becoming a nuclear state if it set its mind to it, and may be able to do so in a period that could be as short as six months.\textsuperscript{35} No doubt, instability in the Korean peninsula would be high during the South’s nuclear development. But Seoul might deem that a period of instability is a reasonable price to pay in order to acquire an autonomous nuclear deterrent that would ensure its security for decades to come. Until now, however, reliable security commitments from Washington have dampened Seoul’s nuclear ambitions.

South Korea may be able to become a nuclear state in as little as six months.

Such reliable U.S. commitments are the key to ensuring South Korea maintains its nonnuclear status. Others have argued that the strong preference of South Korea’s ruling coalition for integration in the U.S.-led global order could make it vulnerable to economic pressure.\textsuperscript{36} According to this view, the Trump administration could effectively deter South Korean nuclear acquisition by threatening economic sanctions. So far, President Trump has actually signaled a willingness to countenance South Korea’s nuclearization. In any case, were the Trump administration to continue to question U.S. commitments to South Korea—or even worse to announce a reduced U.S. presence in the peninsula—Seoul would, in our view, be likely to resuscitate its nuclear program even if that meant facing U.S. sanctions. An autonomous nuclear arsenal would be the best way of ensuring that the North would never attempt Korean reunification by force, while also increasing the risks and costs Pyongyang would have to contemplate in response for any provocation. Therefore, Seoul’s determination to ensure the security of South Korea vis-à-vis the North would likely mean that, in the absence of robust U.S.
security guarantees, the South would be willing to absorb considerable economic cost in order to acquire an autonomous nuclear arsenal.

In the past, when weighing the costs of potential nuclear proliferation by U.S. allies against the desire to have its protégés shoulder more of the costs of their own security, Washington has dependably concluded—albeit often after considerable policy uncertainty—that extending robust security guarantees over protégés is in the United States’ own best interest, by ensuring regional stability and maximizing U.S. influence. Diverging from this path—a move the Trump administration seems to be considering—would entail considerable costs for the United States and for strategic stability in East Asia.

Japan

Contrary to South Korea, Japan has never attempted to develop nuclear weapons since the end of World War II. Having enjoyed reliable U.S. security guarantees, Tokyo has always eschewed an investment in an autonomous nuclear arsenal. Japan’s nuclear forbearance has deep historical roots. The Japanese constitution of 1947 renounces war; Japanese strategy since then relies on U.S. security guarantees and U.S. forces deployed on its soil to mitigate any security threats—a logic known as the “Yoshida Doctrine.” To this day, Japan continues to impose considerable limitations on its own conventional military capabilities. As a result, it depends on U.S. protection against both North Korea and, perhaps more importantly, a rising China—at least as much as its South Korean neighbor. Perhaps even more than in the case of South Korea, Japan’s nuclear policy is shaped by the reliability of U.S. security guarantees.

While renouncing nuclear weapons, Japan possesses a capacious nuclear energy program and a mature space program. Were it to decide for nuclearization, therefore, Tokyo would quickly be able to place nuclear warheads on long-range missiles. Estimates of the nuclear breakout period that Tokyo would face range from less than 6 months to a more conservative 3-5 years. In any case, Japanese nuclearization would entail serious potential for regional instability, creating conditions propitious for a nuclear arms race if not a preventive counterproliferation war. At the root of the Yoshida Doctrine was an attempt to reassure the region and the world of Japan’s peaceful intentions. Serious concerns would arise, especially in Beijing, if Japan were to pursue an independent nuclear arsenal.

Japanese reliance on U.S. security guarantees has been tested over the decades, with Washington consistently reiterating its determination to protect Japan whenever threatened. When in 1964, China tested its first nuclear weapon, Japanese Prime Minister Sato Eisaku hinted at the possibility that Japan might also go nuclear, telling U.S. ambassador Edwin Reischauer that “if other fellow had nuclears [sic] it was only common sense to have them oneself.” In response, President
Lyndon Johnson told Sato that “since Japan possesses no nuclear weapons, and we have them, if Japan needs our nuclear deterrent for its defense, the United States would stand by its commitment and provide that defense. … Japan need not give even a second thought to the dependability of its American ally.” Sato responded positively, telling Johnson that “although he could see why it might be argued that if China has nuclear weapons, Japan should also, this was not Japan’s policy.” In the end, Sato was satisfied with an unequivocal restatement of U.S. security assurances.

Three years later, Japan deepened its commitment to remaining a nonnuclear state by adopting the so-called “three nonnuclear principles”: Japan would not produce, possess, or introduce nuclear weapons on its territory. Sato met again with President Johnson, stating that “Japan’s whole security was based on its security arrangement with the U.S. The Japanese were well protected by the U.S. nuclear umbrella and Japan had no intention to make nuclear weapons.” A reliable U.S. nuclear umbrella has always been the necessary condition for Japan’s nuclear forbearance.

Soon, shifts in U.S. policy would again test Japanese confidence in U.S. security guarantees. In early 1968, President Johnson announced the de-escalation of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The following year, President Nixon announced his “Guam doctrine,” asking the United States’ Asian allies to shoulder more of the costs of their own security—based on a logic not unlike that underpinning the Trump administration’s recent pronouncements. Consequently, Sato’s government entertained the possibility of altering Japanese defense policy and commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of Japanese nuclearization from the Cabinet Information Research Office—what became known as the 1968/70 Internal Report. This study concluded that even though Tokyo had the economic and technological wherewithal to build a nuclear arsenal, Japan’s nuclearization would be counterproductive for its security situation. A Japanese bomb would cause serious concerns among its adversaries; plus, the particularly high population density of the country made it especially vulnerable to nuclear attack. Japan’s security would be ensured as long as its adversaries believed that they would face U.S. nuclear retaliation. The report thus recommended continued reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. In February 1970, Japan agreed to sign the NPT.

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan’s security concerns focus on a rising and revisionist China and on North Korea provocations. When Pyongyang first tested a nuclear weapon in 2006, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reaffirmed Japan’s
adherence to the three nonnuclear principles, while President George W. Bush reasserted the U.S. commitment to Japanese security. President Barack Obama offered similar assurances after each subsequent North Korean nuclear test.

Japan’s nuclear forbearance is certainly made easier by Japanese public opinion, which is frequently described as allergic to nuclear weapons as a result of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a feeling that was only reinforced with the disaster at Fukushima. Nevertheless, reliable U.S. security assurances, supported by the presence of a large number of U.S. troops in Japan, have played a key role in maintaining Japan’s unique forbearance against nuclear weapons. After all, Japan is the world’s third largest economy and possesses full control of the nuclear fuel cycle, yet remains a nonnuclear state.

Faced with a rising and increasingly assertive China and with a rapidly growing North Korean nuclear ability to target the Japanese islands, Tokyo more than ever relies on U.S. security guarantees to be able to deter aggression without its own autonomous nuclear arsenal. Should the Trump administration question U.S. commitments to its East Asian allies, Tokyo may be pushed to change its policy of nuclear forbearance.

As with South Korea, Washington might still attempt to deter Japanese nuclearization by imposing economic sanctions on Japan while denying it credible security guarantees. In our view, despite the deep level of international integration of the Japanese economy and the strong preference of Japanese leaders to remain embedded in the U.S.-led economic order, the dire security situation in which Japan would be left in this scenario would likely lead Tokyo to push toward nuclear acquisition despite any sanctions.

The key source of instability in this scenario, however, would stem from Beijing’s likely reaction to a Japanese proliferation effort. Given the short breakout period Tokyo enjoys, Beijing’s leadership would have to decide fast on China’s policy. A preventive counterproliferation strike against Japan would be exceedingly costly and, for now, likely to be beyond the technical capability of the Chinese military, but a forceful Chinese reaction, including threats of military action, is not beyond the realm of the possible.

This risk of Japanese nuclear acquisition would, of course, be compounded by eventual South Korean nuclearization. Were Seoul to build an autonomous nuclear arsenal, Tokyo would be greatly tempted to do so as well. In what concerns U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, then, U.S. security commitments to each of its two main East Asian allies are deeply interconnected. The removal of U.S. security guarantees to either South Korea or Japan would trigger a process that would vastly augment instability in East Asia.

Were Seoul to build a nuclear arsenal, Tokyo would be greatly tempted to do so as well.
Horizontal and Vertical Proliferation Risks

Any U.S. administration must choose how much it should prioritize nonproliferation among all its other foreign policy goals. Based on little more than one year in office, the Trump administration appears to value nonproliferation relatively less than its predecessors, privileging instead what it sees as greater U.S. freedom of action vis-à-vis its adversaries as well as a more substantial shouldering of the financial burdens of defense by its protégés. As such, the Trump administration seems both willing to entertain the possibility of a war that would bring catastrophic costs to U.S. allies and unwilling to extend reliable security guarantees to these same allies.

Each of these two policies poses a considerable risk of nuclear proliferation—both vertical proliferation in its adversary, North Korea, and horizontal proliferation to its current allies, South Korea and possibly Japan. U.S. adversaries such as North Korea will be keen to broaden their set of nuclear capabilities and ensure the survivability of their arsenal in case of a U.S. strike. U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea will be keen to consider an independent nuclear arsenal. Seoul and Tokyo may come to see proliferation as the best means of ensuring their own security without the risks inherent in depending on an unreliable ally.

Should South Korea or even Japan nuclearize, a cascade of nuclear policy decisions leading to greater numbers of nuclear weapons—in China, India, and Pakistan—and perhaps new nuclear states—from regional powers such as Australia to far-away states with UN Security Council permanent membership aspirations such as Brazil—would require redoubled attention from U.S. policymakers. In the end, the United States is likely to face either a world with more nuclear powers, and therefore diminished U.S. influence; or a world with greater U.S. security commitments extended to avoid proliferation, and therefore increased risks of U.S. involvement in conflicts only indirectly related to its security. Either way, inattention to the potential that current U.S. policy entails for nuclear proliferation in East Asia is likely to undermine U.S. long-term security interests.

Notes


5. See ibid., 88–116.

6. See the discussion of the case of Iran in ibid., 151–175.

7. See the discussion of the cases of the Soviet Union and Iraq in ibid., 116–131 and 131–151, respectively.

8. See ibid., 297–326.


34. Ibid, 158. Since 1978, the United States presents an annual declaration of the U.S. nuclear umbrella as part of its annual Security Consultative Meeting with South Korea. For an analysis of the language of such declarations, see Terence Roehrig, Japan, South Korea, and the United States Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence After the Cold War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 124–153, esp. 126–127.


