The danger of U.S. allies wanting their own nuclear weapons appears to have intensified since Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016. During the election campaign, Trump complained that the United States contributed too much to the security of its allies while they failed to pay their fair share of the common defense burden. If those allies failed to boost their defense spending, he warned, then they should not expect the United States to rescue them if they came under attack.\(^1\) In what would be a radical departure from existing U.S. nonproliferation policy, he even intimated in an election debate that he would accept decisions by South Korea and Japan to acquire nuclear weapons.\(^2\)

Even though concerns about his support for Seoul and Tokyo going nuclear have waned, expectations that the presidency would soften his approach seem otherwise to find disappointment. News outlets warn of his destructive management of alliances amidst trade wars and acrimonious leadership summits.\(^3\) National debates have erupted in allied capitals over the desirability of greater strategic autonomy from Washington. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has echoed French President Emmanuel Macron’s call for the formation of a European army that would allow their countries to achieve greater independence in their foreign and defense policies. Because allies can no longer rely on the United States in the age of Trump, they might even try to get the so-called absolute weapon to deter stronger adversaries like Russia or China on their own.\(^4\)

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The link between alliances and nuclear proliferation has never been as clear as the folk wisdom suggests. Very rarely in international politics can a state be reasonably confident that its allies would come to its aid in the event of an attack. Well before Trump took office, fears existed that a security guarantor like the United States might simply opt out of a war at the expense of a beleaguered ally, especially if nuclear escalation was possible. Abandonment fears, in other words, are natural for states to have even in the best of circumstances. But for abandonment fears to induce such an extraordinary decision as nuclear weapons acquisition, something much more fundamental has to change to destroy enough confidence in a received security guarantee.

In this essay, I argue that security guarantees to U.S. allies are adequate, and will remain so in the foreseeable future, for deterring allied nuclear proliferation. Abandonment fears have undoubtedly intensified with the Trump administration, but not to such an extent that nuclear proliferation appears highly likely. Specifically, the United States still provides deterrence-by-denial capabilities—that is, the capabilities to attrite, if not to defeat, adversaries in defensive battles—to key allies through its overseas deployments and military planning. It does not depend solely on extended nuclear deterrence or the threat of nuclear punishment to dissuade potential adversaries from attacking its allies.

Accordingly, allied states do not rely on the rhetoric of the White House alone to gauge the strength of their received security guarantees. They also refer to what is happening operationally at the military level. That is not to say that rhetoric is unimportant, but it is a noisy signal of intentions and can be interpreted in multiple ways since it can service domestic consumption or even intra-alliance bargaining over burden sharing. When worrisome rhetoric becomes operational reality, states would be more likely to get so alarmed as to consider seriously the nuclear option. Yet, such historical moments are rare: they have occurred only during the Eisenhower (1953-1961) and Nixon administrations (1969-1974), when global nuclear nonproliferation rules and various enforcement mechanisms were in their infancy.

How Alliances Can Deter Nuclear Proliferation

Alliances are formal or informal arrangements that two or more states use to coordinate their military policies with each other, whether for offensive or defensive purposes. Scholars generally view formal defensive alliances like the North
Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, and the U.S.-ROK alliance as crucial for reducing the nuclear weapons interest on the part of the countries that benefit from these security arrangements. The logic for how formal defense pacts might discourage nuclear proliferation is straightforward. Since the United States has signed a written document pledging to assist an ally militarily, an adversary would refrain from attack. For one, an adversary might calculate that Washington would not have gone through the hassle of ratifying a security treaty through domestic legislatures for an ally of little value. For another, a direct attack on a treaty ally would engage the reputation of the United States. Washington would come under psychological pressure to rescue its ally for fear that not doing so would convey irresolution and cowardice. Other partners would begin questioning their own received commitments. Adversaries would become bolder so as to press their claims against U.S. and allied interests more aggressively.

Yet, allies might not want to place too much faith on signed pledges. Scholars have found that allies in general, although not necessarily the United States, reneged on their commitments 44 percent of the time when war broke out before 1945, and 78 percent of the time between 1945 and 2003. Several reasons account for all this reneging. To begin with, interests change over time, even if an alliance declaration is an attempt to make them at least appear sticky. Another is that actually aiding an ally militarily bears high costs and risks. At the time of treaty signature, the security guarantor might have at least partly understood these implications, but the calculus might have evolved due to military-technological developments. This is especially true in the nuclear age when a conventional conflict can spiral out of control and create pressures for nuclear weapons use. A guarantor might determine that exchanging one or more of its cities to save an ally may not actually be worthwhile. Indeed, the promise to impose unacceptable costs via a major nuclear attack (usually called deterrence-by-punishment) can suffer from such inherent credibility issues. Allies naturally fear abandonment as a result.

If treaty pledges are insufficient and threats of nuclear retaliation lack believability, then what information does an ally use to evaluate the strength of its received security guarantees? The answer is that the ally examines the foreign policy doctrine and military deployments of the guarantor to estimate the support the ally can expect if attacked. Foreign policy doctrine conveys information on the interests of the guarantor. Does the United States have the same threat assessment regarding a particular adversary, and does it pursue a similar strategy for containing or confronting that adversary? To what extent does the United States accord importance to the regional theater in which an ally is situated? Like rhetoric, however, foreign policy doctrine can be a noisy indicator: what a guarantor like the United States broadcasts to the world in key policy documents may not
reflect what it does in a crisis. Allies thus monitor how and where the United States is spending money on its overseas deployments and military operations to evaluate the credibility of security guarantees.

The most tangible indicator is where (and to what extent) the United States is positioning its forward-deployed forces.\textsuperscript{13} Yet, the significance of conventional military deployments is often misunderstood since many analysts usually regard all frontline troops as tripwires. According to tripwire theory, these forces are garrisoned on an ally’s territory in order to create additional risks for an adversary. If the adversary attacks the ally and U.S. soldiers happen to die in action, then Washington would be under pressure to retaliate by expanding the conflict beyond what the adversary is willing to tolerate. The tripwire effect is important because it enhances deterrence-by-punishment. But forward-deployed U.S. forces have an additional, often obscured, advantage if they can mass firepower. They can have the capacity to raise the costs of aggression directly by killing an adversary’s attacking soldiers. That is, they can enhance local deterrence-by-denial, which refers to the ability to hinder the adversary from achieving operational success on the battlefield or from executing military \emph{faits accomplis} at acceptable cost.

The history of nuclear proliferation demonstrates that the military infrastructure undergirding an alliance matters for curbing states’ appetites for nuclear weapons. During the 1950s, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer appeared satisfied with U.S. security guarantees despite the Eisenhower administration’s stated rhetorical reliance on nuclear weapons to deter Soviet aggression in its New Look strategy. But Adenauer’s confidence appeared to rest in the U.S. troop presence in his country. He so valued that presence that when he read in the \textit{New York Times} that the U.S. military was planning massive personnel cuts (which in turn would reduce U.S. forces in Europe), he became despondent and lost faith in U.S. security guarantees. Shortly thereafter, Adenauer entered into an arrangement with France and Italy to develop a European nuclear deterrent.\textsuperscript{14} This initiative was short-lived, but questions over West Germany’s nuclear intentions troubled U.S. decision makers for another decade.

Similar experiences were repeated elsewhere. South Korean President Park Chung-hee began considering the nuclear weapons option upon learning that U.S. President Richard Nixon would withdraw 20,000 troops from South Korea. A program came into being by 1972.\textsuperscript{15} Park knew of Nixon’s stated plan to shift the conventional defense burden onto allies in East Asia (that is, the Nixon Doctrine), but believed that his country’s contributions to the Vietnam
War would exempt South Korea. Even Japan was alarmed at this time—initially having had concerns raised by China first detonating a nuclear weapon in 1964, and then exacerbated by the seeming inability and unwillingness of the United States to defend East Asia from communist aggression in light of its failures in the Vietnam War toward the end of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency and into Nixon’s. Against this backdrop, its leaders determined that, if nothing else, proliferation-risky technologies like centrifuges would bear security benefits for Japan.  

Current Proliferation Risks in Europe and East Asia

How possible is it for history to repeat itself? Below, I focus on Germany and South Korea, for two reasons. First, they are two U.S. allies that Trump has singled out for being “unfair” to the United States. Second, they are located in regions that have seen the security environment deteriorate in recent years, whether because of Russian revisionism, the rise of China, or North Korean provocations. Third, they both—to varying degrees of success—attempted to acquire enrichment and reprocessing technologies in the past. Of course, the nuclear nonproliferation regime is much more robust than it was in the 1950s or even the late 1960s, yet some argue that nonproliferation norms are weakening and so traditional alliances may matter more for nuclear nonproliferation again.

Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany joined NATO in 1955. As the first NATO Secretary General Lord Ismay famously said, this alliance served to “keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down.” After all, the United States had in 1955 little history of entangling alliances, let alone keeping a standing army in peacetime. At the time, the Soviet Union was an ideological great power adversary that maintained a large military presence near West Germany’s borders in Central and Eastern Europe. Germany and Berlin were by this point split into two, with communist authorities in control of their eastern portions, after the Allied powers consolidated their postwar zones of occupation. Because Germany had started two world wars in the last 40 years, the NATO military presence sought to provide a check on German power, in addition to defending the country from external attack.

Assurance and defense became key missions, however, when the Korean War broke out in East Asia. The U.S. military presence alone in West Germany tripled from about 98,000 to over 250,000 between 1950 and 1954. In light of the Soviet Union’s conventional superiority, Washington relied on its larger nuclear forces to deter Soviet aggression, vaguely promising “massive retaliation”
as a riposte. But beginning in the 1960s, qualitative improvements in NATO’s conventional military forces ostensibly allowed the United States and its allies to seek more flexible options to check Soviet aggression. Yet, troop numbers stayed above 200,000 throughout the Cold War.¹⁹

West Germany did not have an apolitical relationship with nuclear technology during the Cold War. As indicated above, it explored the nuclear weapons option when its leaders (reasonably but erroneously) began to believe that the United States was retracting its military commitments. After all, Washington’s stated intention to deter the Soviet Union largely with nuclear weapons (and without conventional military forces in Europe) seemed for a time to become reality. Although its active pursuit of this option was short-lived, Germany was able to acquire uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing capabilities—in effect, a latent capability—while international concerns about its nuclear intentions were partly responsible for the contemporaneous negotiations of what would become the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).²⁰ Germany operated seven nuclear power reactors, with more planned or under construction, by 1975 when it finally ratified the NPT.²¹

By 2018, however, much had changed. Its reprocessing program shut down since 1990, Germany would need to nationalize a uranium fuel enrichment plant run by the Urenco Group, a public-private company split between Dutch, German, and British stakeholders. It has transferred all its plutonium to France and Great Britain. Indeed, Germany is undergoing a process of divesting itself completely from nuclear energy by 2022, not least because of how the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan shocked Germany’s political leaders and energized its antinuclear movement.²² The German government has sought to phase out nuclear energy use in favor of renewable energy sources. This policy has broad popular support. Germany no longer has the nuclear latency it had in the Cold War.²³

Yet, a growing number of German pundits and journalists have been calling for Germany to reconsider its nuclear policies. Much of this apparent reawakening has to do with the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, as well as with the Trump administration and its unkind treatment toward Germany. During the election campaign, Trump castigated Chancellor Angela Merkel for her permissive refugee policy. He also accused Germany of not paying its fair share of the defense burden while describing NATO more broadly as “obsolete.” In an allusion to the two percent spending commitment made by NATO members, he forcefully asserted that “[m]any NATO nations are not making their payments” and suggested that he would not fulfill treaty obligations to those allies who come
under attack but have not made their payments. As president, he has said Germany has been “not fair” to the United States by spending 1.13 percent on defense in 2017, well below the agreed upon 2 percent threshold. Trump aggravated matters by withdrawing from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and beginning a trade war with the European Union and other allies by imposing tariffs on steel, aluminum, and other goods.

This combination of rhetoric and action has prompted German observers to question seriously the reliability of the United States and thus the desirability of depending on it for security. The influential publisher Berthold Kohler suggested that Germany might want to think about having “an independent nuclear deterrent which could ward off doubts about America’s guarantees.” One less-known German academic argued that “Germany needs nuclear weapons.” Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute director Thorsten Benner opined that “Germany should preserve its latent capability to build nuclear weapons.” Another well-known German academic wrote that “Germany’s new role as enemy number one of the United States president forces it to radically reconsider its security policy.” Some contend that, if not an indigenous nuclear weapons program, Germany should contribute to the development of some kind of Eurodeterrent in partnership with France and other European allies.

Such views remain in the minority and betray an under-appreciation for the technical and political difficulties that a German nuclear deterrent, or a Eurodeterrent, would have to overcome. What matters for the purpose of this discussion is how, notwithstanding this debate, Germany continues to derive key security benefits from its allies’ significant military support. The British Army may be in the process of withdrawing many of its combat troops from Germany by 2019, but some of them will remain because of the Russian threat. Others will still continue to train in large numbers for the sake of NATO interoperability. More important is, of course, the U.S. military presence. U.S. Army Europe is based in Wiesbaden, whereas Ramstein Air Base—one of the largest overseas U.S. military installations—is the headquarters for U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Air Forces Africa, and NATO Allied Air Command. Put together, the United States has over 34,000 active duty personnel stationed in Germany, to say nothing of their families. The United States also maintains B61 tactical nuclear weapons that are currently undergoing modernization.

Germany’s security situation also benefits from the geographical distance from any potential frontline thanks to NATO’s northeastern boundaries being those of Poland and the three Baltic states. Those countries have perceived greater insecurity since 2014 precisely because of their positioning and relatively small size. To assure them of alliance support in the face of potential Russian aggression, NATO has deployed 1,000 personnel-strong battle groups to each of those four countries in addition to 3,000 more U.S. troops in Poland. Russia simply does
not have the capacity to launch a conventional military assault against Germany anymore.\textsuperscript{34} Even if Russia has tactical nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles in Kaliningrad, which could reach German cities, the large numbers of U.S. troops would still provide a tripwire effect.\textsuperscript{35} Germany thus enjoys not only significant U.S. military presence, but also lots of defense in depth.

That defense in depth may not matter if Trump pulls the United States out of Europe wholesale and NATO ceases to exist. But neither scenario seems plausible in the foreseeable future. To be sure, in the run-up to the NATO Brussels Summit in July 2018, rumors circulated that the Trump administration was studying whether to move all or some of its forces away from Germany to the United States or to neighboring Poland. The Department of Defense flatly denied that such a study was in the works.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, for all of Trump’s rhetoric, the United States has increased its military presence in Germany by adding 1,500 more troops in September 2018. This new deployment includes a field artillery headquarters, a short-range air defense battalion, two multiple launch rocket systems battalions, and other supporting units.\textsuperscript{37} Even if the Trump administration decides to move some forces into Poland to take up Polish President Andrzej Duda’s offer to help pay for a permanent presence, such a move would not adversely affect German military security if it augments NATO’s defense in depth.\textsuperscript{38}

The continued presence of U.S. forces reduces incentives for Germany to develop a nuclear deterrent of its own or in concert with other European partners. Though the security environment facing Berlin has worsened since 2014, its receipt of external military support—in addition to how Germany is not a front-line state and has been divesting itself of nuclear energy more generally—suggests that nuclear proliferation by Berlin is improbable. Small wonder that pro-nuclear arguments have encountered much pushback, with former German ambassador to the United States and Munich Security Conference chairman Wolfgang Ischinger asserting that “a discussion about European nuclear weapons is the last thing that is needed.”\textsuperscript{39}

South Korea
Signed in October 1953, the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea largely backstops the Korean Armistice Agreement against renewed aggression—whether by North Korea, China, or any other potential attacker. The United States has not relied on this written agreement alone to
deter external armed attack, however. It also established a local sub-unified command of the United States Pacific Command in 1957. This command—called United States Forces Korea (USFK)—oversees a major U.S. military presence that, as of 2018, comprises approximately 24,000 personnel on the peninsula. Between 1958 and 1970, the number of U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea fluctuated between a low of 46,024 and a high of 66,531 in 1969. For much of the remainder of the Cold War, that number hovered around 40,000. Owing to geography, the U.S. Army makes up the bulk of the forward-deployed forces in South Korea.

This package of political and military commitments aims to deter North Korea (and other potential adversaries) from attacking the South at high levels of conflict. The commitments do not intend to deter smaller provocations, or what can be termed "gray zone activities." After all, early in the Cold War, South Korea was inferior to the North in terms of wealth and industrial capacity, and so it would have faced the very credible threat of another invasion if U.S. forces withdrew from the peninsula. The balance of power began to shift during the second half of the Cold War, with South Korea overtaking the North economically thanks to its industrial policies. By the mid-1990s, some observers even wrote that South Korea had "outright superiority … once one factors in the effects of superior training, equipment maintenance, logistics, and support equipment like reconnaissance and communications gear" despite having half the military personnel. Of course, even in a purely conventional military conflict, North Korea can still wreak extensive damage with artillery, and more importantly, ballistic missiles that are aimed at Seoul and other targets near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Because of this threat, and the effort made by North Korea to develop nuclear weapons, U.S. forces have remained largely in place with the exception of nonstrategic nuclear weapons that were fully withdrawn from the peninsula in the early 1990s.

South Korea has significant nuclear expertise. It first gained access to small experimental reactors through the Eisenhower administration’s Atoms for Peace program in the 1950s. By the late 1960s, its leaders hoped to develop a civilian nuclear industry in order to support their ambitious goals for rapid industrialization. South Korea attempted to develop its own nuclear weapons in the 1970s following President Richard Nixon’s surprise announcement to withdraw a troop division from the peninsula, but this nuclear effort was unsuccessful. Lacking access to large uranium-ore deposits and other materials necessary for making fissile explosives, the South Korean government shopped abroad for sensitive nuclear technologies to advance its program. The U.S. intelligence community eventually learned of the program and Washington responded by using various economic and military levers in an effort to curb South Korea’s nuclear ambitions.
Although Washington initially appeared to have coerced Seoul into making nonproliferation commitments, including the ratification of the NPT in 1975, covert safeguard violations continued to take place sporadically into the early 1980s. Such violations continued even in the 1990s, and were often efforts by nuclear scientists to study uranium enrichment and plutonium separation in laboratory experiments. However, because these experiments were relatively small in scale and risked undermining diplomatic efforts with North Korea, South Korea escaped serious censure. Notwithstanding these transgressions, South Korea’s nuclear activities are now peaceful. As of 2017, it has 24 nuclear power reactors that account for 27 percent of its electricity production, with five more to be operative by 2023. South Korea has even become an exporter of nuclear technology, with ambitions to grab a sizeable share of the global nuclear reactor market. Unlike Japan, however, South Korea does not have U.S. consent for enrichment and reprocessing. This double standard not only deprives Seoul of the ability to master the entire fuel cycle, but it also endows nuclear technology with emotional significance for South Korean nationalists.

Different alliance-related fears have intensified in South Korea since Trump became the U.S. president. The presidential campaign saw Trump assert merely one day after North Korea tested a nuclear device that “we get paid nothing, we get paid peanuts” for having troops in South Korea. He also intimated that he would be fine with South Korea (and Japan) acquiring nuclear weapons if that meant less pressure on the United States to defend them. He described the 2012 U.S.–South Korea free trade agreement as a “job-killing trade deal” that should have never been signed. In office, Trump spent his first year ratcheting diplomatic and military pressure on North Korea to stop its nuclear weapons program, going as far as threatening “fire and fury.” He apparently had drafted an order to scrap the free trade deal unilaterally, only to be prevented from doing so by his advisers. Trump surprised South Korean leaders, and even Pentagon officials, when he announced that he would cease military exercises in a deal he personally struck with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un after the June 2018 Singapore Summit.

Predictably, much consternation abounded in Seoul. Decision makers were unsure whether the United States would abandon them to North Korea rather than risk war, or more importantly, whether the United States would drag them into a destructive peninsular war that they definitely did not want. Indeed, North Korea’s nuclear capabilities are apparently improving such that it could be in a position to separate (i.e. decouple) South Korea from the United States. A 2017 Gallup poll revealed that about 60 percent of South Koreans believe that their country should have nuclear weapons. Though a supporter of Trump’s management of North Korea, a major opposition leader has called on the creation of a “freedom nuclear alliance” that includes South Korea,
Japan, and the United States. To be sure, support for nuclear weapons development is not a new phenomenon in South Korea’s democratic politics. Conservative lawmakers and commentators have long been expressing support for South Korea to start its own nuclear weapons program. However, some observers claim that South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s stated ambition to create nuclear-powered submarines may be part of a nuclear hedging strategy in light of the growing North Korean threat and Trump’s alliance management.

Little of Trump’s rhetoric inspires confidence, but—consistent with my argument about security guarantees—underneath this rhetoric belies some of the operational developments taking place on the peninsula. As political scientists Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich argue, “a change in military operations has occurred,” but Trump’s initial rhetorical escalation was partly because Kim did the same, and Trump’s rhetoric has been “coupled with an offer to negotiate consistent with the behavior of his predecessor.” In addition, the Trump administration has shored up local defenses in South Korea. Despite Trump announcing that South Korea should pay for the terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD) system, his administration quickened its deployment and ultimately agreed to respect the terms of the original agreement negotiated by the Obama administration. The administration also succeeded in renegotiating, not terminating, the free trade agreement. To be sure, Trump did undermine his own Secretary of Defense by tweeting how “there is no reason at this time to be spending large amounts of money on joint U.S.-South Korea war games.” The troops remain in place, however, even if the lack of exercising has some potential for worsening war-fighting capabilities and thus weakening deterrence-by-denial. Considering that Nixon and Jimmy Carter sought troop withdrawals from Korea early in their presidencies, with mixed success and much resistance, the Trump administration shows little sign of reopening that question. The troops will likely remain there as a hedge against inevitable North Korean perfidy.

The crisis with North Korea highlights, if anything, the difficulties of threading the needle between assurance and deterrence. Deterrence succeeds when an adversary desists from aggressive military action because it knows that it will lose the fight on the battlefield (deterrence-by-denial) or its core values and interests suffer unacceptable damage (deterrence-by-punishment). For the United States to signal strongly that North Korea will lose any war with it, South Korea will inevitably feel uncomfortable. Of course, Trump probably did not threaten North Korea to assure South Korea.

For this reason, the South Korean president has chosen a policy course much like what West Germany did when it confronted a similar situation in the
1960s. West Germany decided to cultivate certain ties with East Germany and the communist bloc partly out of recognition that it could never fully be assured by Washington while the danger of nuclear war intensified. South Korea may be pursuing a similar strategy with the North. Of course, in its time, West Germany was able to master the fuel cycle, whereas South Korea may not have that luxury today. Still, the normative significance of such technologies has changed so much as to make any effort to master the fuel cycle much more politically charged now than they were in the 1960s.

Thanks to the persistently large U.S. military presence on the peninsula, South Korea is unlikely to develop its own nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future. Of course, some lawmakers will continue to call for an independent nuclear weapons capability, but such calls were being made years before Trump became president. For his part, President Moon has asserted that South Korea would not seek nuclear weapons. And so, despite calls by some academics to study the nuclear weapons option more seriously, such initiatives will likely see limited traction at the highest levels of government in South Korea.

Alliances Are Thicker Than Bluster

U.S. security guarantees have been strained in the last decade due to weariness with wars abroad and economic difficulties at home. The Trump factor has appeared to make matters worse: tense leadership summits, confrontational rhetoric, political volatility, and the rough handling of long-standing international partners on issues like trade and burden sharing do not inspire confidence. Nevertheless, we have some reasons to be relatively optimistic. Large-scale troop withdrawals from major regional theaters of operations have not happened; nor do they appear to be happening anytime soon. Because its force posture remains largely intact, the United States still has on-the-ground preparations to help allies defend themselves against an adversarial attack. This is true of key allies, like Germany and South Korea, that might be major candidates for reevaluating existing weapons policies and nonproliferation pledges in the age of Trump.

None of this analysis suggests that we can be flippant about allied nuclear proliferation risks or the direction of U.S. foreign policy. We should be vigilant about early warning signs that could foreshadow heightened proliferation risks such as substantial and unilateral changes in U.S. military deployments as well as operations from the European and East Asian theaters, leaving allies exposed to the depredations of adversaries. Yet, none appears afoot at the present. Indeed, what the preceding discussion suggests is that alliances are much more resilient institutions than commonly presumed. Their underlying military infrastructures remain in place because they help the United States project power abroad and
thus advance foreign policy goals. To jettison them quickly and abruptly would be self-sabotaging even if the Trump administration cares less about the liberal international order than its predecessors, and is willing to use threats to increase its leverage in burden-sharing or trade negotiations. In the end, the core of the administration’s defense strategy concerns strategic competition with Russia, China, and North Korea. To pursue great power competition effectively, the United States will not only have to maintain its key alliances, but it will also have to bolster local deterrence and defense measures so that those adversaries will have limited opportunities to extend their power and influence.

Alliances are thus much more resilient than is often assumed. Their resiliency draws more on actual force deployment than what may or may not be said by leaders in public. Accordingly, concerns about allied proliferation in countries like Germany and South Korea may be overblown. As long as force deployments remain consistent and robust in the face of external aggression, history shows that host countries will have few incentives to pursue an independent nuclear weapons capability.

Endnotes


34. For one view of Russia’s recent military modernization program, see Bettina Renz, Russia’s Military Revival (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).


44. See Lanoszka, Atomic Assurance, 110–131.


47. Fitzpatrick, Asia’s Latent Nuclear Powers, 49.
63. See Lanośka, Atomic Assurance, 74–76.

