

ATOMIC ASSURANCE:  
THE ALLIANCE POLITICS OF NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

ALEXANDER LANOSZKA

DICKEY FELLOW OF US FOREIGN POLICY

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

[ALEXANDER.LANOSZKA@DARTMOUTH.EDU](mailto:ALEXANDER.LANOSZKA@DARTMOUTH.EDU)

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## INTRODUCTION

Some observers of international politics fear that, unlike in the Cold War, the prevention of nuclear wars no longer depends on the superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—managing their competition rationally. Rather, a multipolar nuclear order beckons as states in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia increasingly see nuclear weapons as an essential tool of diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> For the United States, much is at stake. A key pillar of its foreign policy has been to limit the number of states with nuclear weapons. The nonproliferation mission might become harder to accomplish if predictions of American decline are true.

One tool that the United States has traditionally used for curbing nuclear proliferation is its system of alliances. Since their formation at the beginning of the Cold War, many experts agree that alliances have enabled the United States to manage local conflicts, prevent arms races, and reassure partners that the United States will defend them in a military crisis involving a shared adversary. The net result is that recipients of these security guarantees feel less need to acquire nuclear weapons. When allies have pursued nuclear weapons development, guarantors like the United States apply coercive pressure so as to halt their ambitions. If standard accounts of the Cold War are any guide, the United States might fulfill its nonproliferation mission in the emerging multipolar order so long as it retains its superior military capabilities and preserves its alliances. Such is the emerging narrative of the American experience of the nuclear era: that the future is perilous for the global nonproliferation regime, that alliances are effective nonproliferation tools, and that the Cold War is a story of American nonproliferation success.

This book will challenge each of these notions by making three related claims. First, many smaller states during the Cold War saw enough value in nuclear weapons that they made efforts to acquire them. If the distinguishing feature of the emerging

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul J. Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2012): 2.

multipolar nuclear order is the nuclear activity of smaller states, then we are misreading history. The present bears more similarity to the past than not.<sup>2</sup> Second, alliances might be important devices for thwarting nuclear proliferation, but they are more susceptible to breakdown and credibility concerns than some accounts in the international relations literature presume. Indeed, it is puzzling that alliances would ever be considered a viable solution for nuclear proliferation. The strong commitments needed to discourage nuclear proliferation nevertheless should create perverse incentives for allies to act contrary to the interests of the United States. Beneficiaries of strong commitments might be emboldened to undertake aggressive foreign policies that dismay and even extort the United States. Third, and finally, although the United States has played an important role in enforcing the nuclear nonproliferation regime, we should be careful not to attribute too much success to the United States. It encountered severe difficulties in reversing suspect nuclear behaviors of key allies like West Germany and Japan, to say nothing of Great Britain and France—allies that feared American abandonment, yet succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons. South Korea often serves as an example of the effectiveness of American coercion, but the inchoate state of its nuclear program made it an easy target at a time when the United States wanted to demonstrate its commitment to nuclear nonproliferation.

The goal of this book is to expand upon each of these arguments. It does so by investigating the link between alliances and nuclear proliferation using a series of case studies drawn from the Cold War. I consider two main questions. First, how do alliances prevent nuclear proliferation? To answer this question, I examine why some states that have security guarantees have tried to acquire nuclear weapons and why many of these states renounced such efforts by making commitments to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Consider how France succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons whereas Great Britain has nuclear weapons but needs American technological support to keep them. Japan and West Germany do not have nuclear weapons but have acquired enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. Its agreements with the United States forbid South Korea from having reprocessing capabilities to this day. We thus arrive at the second question: what

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar argument, see Francis J. Gavin, “Same As It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War,” *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2010): 7-37.

was the role of the United States in its allies' decisions to renounce nuclear weapons? To motivate these questions even further, it is worth clarifying the puzzle of nuclear proliferation from an alliance perspective.

### **The Puzzle of Alliances and Nuclear Proliferation**

The standard view among international security experts is that guarantors like the United States face a dilemma when they design their alliances. The so-called alliance dilemma is as follows. By offering a strong commitment, the guarantor demonstrates that it will back its ally in the event of a militarized crisis that involves a shared adversary. However, the ally might exploit this favorable situation by pressing its claims against the adversary harder than it otherwise would, thereby raising the likelihood of starting a war that the guarantor does not want. Because the guarantor wishes to protect its reputation for upholding its commitments, it might have to intervene in this war to support its ally. All things equal, the risk of entrapment—that is, of being dragged into an undesirable war—increases with the strength of the alliance commitment.<sup>3</sup> Yet weakening the alliance commitment to lessen entrapment risks introduces new problems. The ally might fear abandonment when it starts to doubt the credibility of the guarantor and its security pledges. A weakened commitment might tempt the adversary to attack the ally, which may be forced to contemplate pre-emptive measures as a result.<sup>4</sup>

As a tool for preventing nuclear proliferation, the alliance commitment must be strong enough for the ally to view it as a credible deterrent against the adversary. Otherwise, doubts about the guarantor's stated pledges would lead the ally to discount the military value of the alliance and to reconsider its own armament choices. From the point of view of the guarantor, the policy challenge becomes acute: how does one craft a security commitment that at once resolves the alliance dilemma and discourages nuclear proliferation-related behavior?

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<sup>3</sup> On alliances and moral hazard, see Brett V. Benson, *Constructing International Security: Alliance, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> On the alliance dilemma, see Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997): 187-188. The alliance dilemma should not be confused with the alliance security dilemma. Glenn Snyder describes this latter dilemma in *idem*, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1984): 461-495.

The difficulty of this policy challenge has led scholars to adopt conflicting positions regarding the relationship between alliances and nuclear proliferation. Some scholars downplay the alliance dilemma and report the stabilizing impact alliances have for international politics. These scholars see formal defense alliances as credible and thus the most desirable security institutions states can have. Because formal alliance treaties are public and are thus known to all other states, guarantors incur high reputation costs for violating them.<sup>5</sup> These alliances are the best for deterring adversaries and reassuring allies. Democratic states like the United States are especially good allies: the transparency of their institutions make them more predictable and the difficulties of shepherding alliance treaties through domestic ratification processes make their commitment choices stronger and more selective.<sup>6</sup> Entrapment concerns are overstated since guarantors can attach conditions and specify the terms in which the alliance would be activated.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, written and public security guarantees (particularly those issued by democratic countries) are credible, allay abandonment fears, and reduce incentives for nuclear proliferation. Yet many scholars see abandonment concerns as a pervasive feature of alliance politics, no matter what type of state dominates the alliance. They argue that such concerns encourage states to seek nuclear weapons in order to deter adversaries on their own.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with many existing alliance-based arguments is that they either expect too little or too much nuclear proliferation. Scholars who see democratically-led alliances as free of alliance pathologies have trouble explaining why nuclear proliferation has largely been an American problem. Of the twenty-nine states that at least considered getting nuclear weapons at one point since 1945, nineteen of them were aligned with the

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<sup>5</sup> James D. Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 3: 63–83.

<sup>6</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and The Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> TongFi Kim, "Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States," *Security Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2011): 350–377. See also Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of US Defense Pacts," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2015): 7–48.

<sup>8</sup> Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1996-1997): 54–86; Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Proliferation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2014): 7–51; and T.V. Paul, *Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

United States. Only three nuclear proliferators had defensive alliances with the Soviet Union: the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Romania. Whereas five of fourteen NATO allies at least considered getting nuclear weapons by the 1970s, only one of seven Warsaw Pact allies committed the same offense. Scholars who see alliances as inherently problematic must face a different challenge. If abandonment concerns are so acute, then why do allies only rarely move to acquire nuclear weapons? Unfortunately, we are yet to have an account that specifies the precise conditions under which states *sufficiently* fear abandonment that they begin desiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, many allies ultimately renounced their efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. It remains an empirical question as to whether such reversals were the result of alliance politics. If they were, then one wonders how an alliance that became so unbelievable as to cause nuclear proliferation ended up becoming persuasive enough to stop it.

These perspectives also have trouble explaining the behavior of the United States and why, as a security guarantor, it should care so much about preventing nuclear proliferation. Francis Gavin shows that nonproliferation has been as much an objective of American grand strategy as democracy promotion and economic liberalization. Limiting the number of states possessing nuclear weapons has sometimes worked at cross-purposes with these other goals. Although the United States might have used institutions to signal restraint towards its allies, as liberal internationalists like G. John Ikenberry argue, it has also resorted to threats in order to compel its allies to abandon nuclear weapons development.<sup>9</sup> Other accounts of the nuclear age are equally problematic. Take, for example, defensive realism—a leading perspective in the study of international politics. Some defensive realists like Robert Jervis have alleged that mutual assured destruction (MAD) has fundamentally altered great power politics. It eliminates threats to territorial sovereignty, thereby enhancing the security of those great powers that possess a secure second-strike capability. One consequence of this so-called ‘nuclear revolution’ is that allies matter less for the security of such fortunate great powers.<sup>10</sup> If true, then not

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<sup>9</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition: US Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation,” *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2015): 9–46.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). For cogent critiques of the so-called ‘nuclear revolution,’ see Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005): 123–148; Francis J.

only should allies fear abandonment (since they are less important to their guarantors), but any effort they undertake for remedying their security situation with nuclear weapons should not provoke any concern, especially from their guarantors. Nuclear weapons acquisition is, after all, security-seeking behavior and helps preserve peace.<sup>11</sup> However, we observe the United States attempting various strategies to force its allies into renouncing these weapons. The empirical record reveals that counterproliferation is more salient than actual proliferation.<sup>12</sup>

## **The Argument**

How do guarantors like the United States design commitments that manage the alliance dilemma and at the same time reduce nuclear proliferation risks? How have alliances curbed the efforts of states that have tried to develop nuclear weapons despite their received security commitments? I advance a new theoretical framework in Chapter 2 that begins with the observation that nuclear security guarantees contain much ambiguity despite involving existential stakes. Consequently, as much as their recipients pay attention to the foreign policy doctrines of their guarantors, they desire more than simple pledges of support. Indeed, they tend to believe that conventional military deployments are necessary for bolstering commitments to extend deterrence. These deployments are not just ‘trip-wires’ that enhance deterrence of adversaries by threatening the involvement of the guarantor should its ally be attacked. They have war-fighting capabilities and are tangible representations of the nuclear security guarantees these states receive.<sup>13</sup> And so states value conventional military deployments more than tactical nuclear deployments, despite how the latter matters more for extended nuclear deterrence. Thus, states see the credibility of their security guarantees tied to such deployments as troops. So long as these commitments appear assured, the temptation to develop nuclear weapons will be limited. Moreover, these troops also have the added benefit of being a

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Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84, no. 3 (1990): 730-745.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas L. Miller, “The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions,” *International Organization*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2014): 913-944.

<sup>13</sup> Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, “Land Power and American Credibility,” forthcoming in *Parameters*.



source of restraint on the foreign policy of the ally. For example, their participation in joint military planning with the ally's own armed forces reduces entrapment risks. However, if allies anticipate or suddenly experience unfavorable conventional redeployments (i.e., unilateral troop withdrawals), then they begin to doubt their security guarantees *enough* to embark upon a set of behaviors related to nuclear proliferation, which range from hedging strategies to the active pursuit of nuclear weapons capability.

It is difficult for the guarantor to bring this behavior to cessation. The guarantor needs to repair the security guarantee that the ally already perceives as sufficiently broken to warrant the pursuit of nuclear weapons. To reassert its security guarantees and to soothe abandonment fears, new agreements that credibly restore or preserve troop levels is one viable strategy. Yet other diplomatic levers have limited efficacy. After all, threatening the withdrawal of more troops or the termination of the alliance altogether so as to isolate the ally will only exacerbate abandonment concerns. I thus argue that the best possible recourse available to the guarantor is its economic power over the ally. If the ally depends on economic goods provided by the guarantor, then the ally might have to reconsider its nuclear activities in the interest of its own economic welfare. Absent such leverage, the guarantor will have trouble getting the ally to renounce nuclear weapons credibly.

Readers will note that my argument makes an assumption about the preferences of the guarantor. Specifically, I assume that one major foreign policy objective of the guarantor involves not only preserving its security guarantees, but also preventing nuclear proliferation. I believe this assumption is defensible, especially if we consider the United States. Of the few consistencies that we find in American foreign policy since 1942 one is the priority assigned to curbing the spread of nuclear weapons. The United States withheld major atomic secrets from its biggest coalition partner in the Second World War and the Manhattan Project, Great Britain. In 1946, Congress passed the Atomic Energy Act so as to restrict other countries' access to the United States' nuclear information. A later amendment to this act still reiterated its anti-proliferation principles, thus becoming a source of frustration to some Presidents who contemplated nuclear-sharing arrangements with other countries. Indeed, Congress has reasserted itself by passing laws

like the Symington and Pressler Amendments to advance anti-proliferation objectives. The counterproliferation policy of the Soviet Union, if there was any, was more ad hoc. Yet, like the United States, it had incentives to limit the spread of nuclear weapons in order to preserve its standing in international politics.<sup>14</sup>

To test my argument, I use a qualitative research design that I elaborate towards the end of Chapter 1. The empirical bulk comprises three intensive case studies on West Germany, Japan, and South Korea. These three American allies also represent most-likely cases for when an alliance with the United States inhibited nuclear interest. For each of these cases, I rely on deep archival research that I have conducted at various national repositories located around the world. The primary documents I collected and discovered serve as process tracing evidence. They allow me to test the causal mechanism and the implications of my theory against several leading alternative arguments; namely, those emphasizing the causal primacy of adversarial threats, the importance of domestic politics, and the prestige that states might see in nuclear weapons. Because I am skeptical of the role that alliances can play in halting nuclear weapons activities definitively, I allow for the possibility that these other causal processes can affect a state's decision to cease its proliferation-related behavior.

Chapter 2 sets up the main case studies of this book by reviewing the history of American security guarantees during much of the Cold War. I show how and why American presidents between Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter designed their alliance commitments and implemented their strategic doctrinal visions. Of interest in this chapter is President Dwight Eisenhower's adoption of the New Look policy, the stated emphasis of 'flexible response' in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and President Richard Nixon's articulation of the Nixon Doctrine. American presidents consistently preferred a military strategy that hinged on the United States providing the 'nuclear sword' and allies providing the 'conventional shield.' Nevertheless, the implementation of this strategy varied over time and in intensity between Western Europe and East Asia. We thus have variation in how allies might assess the security guarantees they receive.

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<sup>14</sup> William C. Potter, "The Soviet Union and Nuclear Proliferation," *Slavic Review*, vol. 44, no. 3 (1985): 468-469.

Chapters 3 and 5 together form a controlled case comparison of West Germany and Japan. Both countries are similar along a number of key dimensions: their roles in the Second World War, liberal democratic political regimes, spectacular economic reconstruction and growth in the post-war period, and hosting of a large-scale American military presence. Despite these similarities, West Germany began considering nuclear weapons development in the mid-1950s whereas Japan began its nuclear hedging behavior about a decade later. I argue that differences in the strategic situations that these two countries faced led them to differ as to how they perceived changes in their security guarantees.

Chapter 3 shows that, as a mostly land-locked country, West Germany was affected by Eisenhower's stated objectives of relying more on nuclear weapons at the expense of such conventional military deployments as ground power. Because the policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations exhibited important continuities from the Eisenhower administration, West Germany had little motivation to renounce nuclear weapons fully. Keeping the focus on Western Europe, Chapter 4 analyzes two successful cases of nuclear proliferation amongst American allies, Great Britain and France. These two cases expand the variation of my study. I conclude that my theory can illuminate why these two allies sought nuclear weapons and why only France succeeded in acquiring an *independent* nuclear deterrent capability.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that Japan was at best indifferent to Eisenhower's New Look because of its geography. Indeed, Japan remained quiescent until China's detonation of its first atomic weapon in 1964—an event that shook the Japanese leadership and forced them to attend more carefully to American security guarantees. As the American military involvement in Vietnam slowly unraveled, Japanese leaders became apprehensive of American alliance support and began to prioritize the development of a centrifuge program. In Chapters 3 and 5, I also show how the United States responded to these allies' efforts in nuclear activities, highlighting why the United States experienced difficulties in imposing a counterproliferation settlement upon them. These countries ultimately ceased engaging in nuclear proliferation-related behavior in spite of, rather than due to, the United States.

Chapter 6 focuses on South Korea, an attractive case for testing competing arguments about nuclear proliferation. Among other reasons, South Korea is a *critical* case for my theory because the American government initiated plans for major troop withdrawals from the peninsula on several separate occasions. In fact, the United States did not seek the South Korean government's consent when it openly sought troop withdrawals in 1970 and 1977. Moreover, these plans for troop withdrawals reflected important shifts in American foreign policy. The magnitude of these shifts should have provoked a response from South Korea. Therefore, if my theory should have empirical validity in any one case, then it is that of South Korea. Accordingly, this case is useful for testing the theory's proposed causal mechanism. I show that South Korea engaged in nuclear proliferation-related activities for about five years in the 1970s. I demonstrate in this chapter that South Korea's nuclear efforts are comprehensible only from the perspective of its alliance with the United States. That is, South Korea first explored and later began a nuclear weapons program in reaction to President Richard Nixon's troop withdrawals from its territory. South Korea operated this program secretly. Yet once the United States discovered it, it successfully pressured South Korea to cancel the primitive nuclear weapons program. South Korea's economic dependence on the United States contributed to this result. However, the story does not end there. President Jimmy Carter sought to withdraw all American forces from South Korea—a move that some observers speculate incited further efforts to develop nuclear weapons secretly.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the main argument, explores additional cases from American and Soviet alliance contexts, and discusses the broader implications of this study for both international theory and policy. To reiterate, I challenge the conventional wisdom that alliances are a potent mechanism for thwarting nuclear proliferation. They are prone to adjustments that can make allies nervous about the reliability of their guarantors. Sometimes these adjustments are severe enough to push states into reconsidering their nuclear policies. When allies step on the path towards nuclear weapons development, guarantors like the United States have limited means at their disposal to force them into renouncing such activities. Simply put, alliances are more effective for deterring *potential* nuclear proliferation than for curbing *actual* cases of nuclear proliferation. These findings should interest policy-makers and practitioners: the

retraction of such military assets as troops can provoke intense abandonment fears even if the fundamental basis of extended nuclear deterrence remains unchanged. As a tool for curbing actual nuclear activities, however, the record of alliance is even more mixed. Much depends on how much economic power the United States has over the proliferating ally. As such, if its relative global position continues to erode, then the United States will find it harder to reverse fully the nuclear undertakings of its allies. American policymakers therefore have an even more urgent need to craft defense policies in ways that already anticipate the likely reactions of their allies.