The Case Against Nuclear Sharing in East Asia

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As the rise of Chinese power and North Korea’s nuclear development alter East Asia’s strategic landscape, American foreign policy analysts continue to look for innovative ways to bolster the security position of US allies in the region. MIT political scientists Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels highlight one potential option in a recent article in The Washington Quarterly, arguing that the United States should revitalize its alliances with Japan and South Korea by exploring “the wartime sharing of nuclear weapons,” which might involve “modifying hardware (e.g., certifying allied F-35s for nuclear delivery), acquiring new systems, and training air or naval crews in tactical nuclear strikes and command and control.”¹ Similar proposals are not difficult to encounter in Washington’s policy community. One analysis calls for the “custodial sharing of nonstrategic nuclear capabilities during times of crisis with select Asia-Pacific partners, specifically Japan and the Republic of Korea [ROK].”² Likewise, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Brad Roberts writes that “[a] more NATO-like nuclear umbrella makes good sense in Northeast Asia today.” Such arrangements “could be replicated in South Korea,” for example, “with US nuclear weapons permanently deployed there along with dual-capable fighter-bombers that would be flown by pilots from both countries.”³

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If sincerely broached, nuclear sharing proposals are likely to find receptive ears among at least some segments of East Asia’s policymaking circles. Influential Japanese policymakers have mentioned nuclear sharing as a potential solution to the declining credibility of US extended deterrence. Interest has been even stronger in Seoul, where prominent politicians and commentators have publicly called for pursuing nuclear sharing agreements with the United States. Former presidential candidate Yoo Seung-min argued in a recent statement that nuclear sharing between the US-ROK alliance, complete with the “forward-deployment of tactical, non-strategic nuclear weapons,” would become a “game-changer” that offers the “surest deterrent power against the North Korean nuclear threat.”

Against this backdrop, we critically examine the case for nuclear sharing in America’s East Asian alliances. Contrary to optimists on both sides of the Pacific, we argue that nuclear sharing in East Asia will likely prove strategically counterproductive. We begin by reviewing the logic of nuclear sharing and its historical manifestations. Next, we analyze the proposal to implement nuclear sharing in contemporary East Asia, using instructive examples from the Cold War to show how the features of its threat environment are likely to undermine the policy’s promised benefits. We then delve into the potential strategic consequences of nuclear sharing, arguing that efforts to implement such arrangements could trigger aggressive responses from regional adversaries and exacerbate discord within the US-led alliance system. The final section summarizes the implications of our analysis for US security policy in East Asia.

**Nuclear Sharing Revisited**

Nuclear sharing denotes policies that grant non-nuclear allies significant roles in the management and employment of a nuclear-armed state’s (i.e., the “patron’s”) nuclear capabilities. The goal is to improve the alliance’s ability to deter an attack on the non-nuclear ally by transferring—to varying degrees—the anticipated locus of nuclear escalation decisions to the ally’s territory. As Thomas Schelling put it, deterrence can be enhanced by “not having everything quite under control … Suggestions that [US] nuclear weapons should be put directly at the disposal of German troops [are based on the idea] that the Germans would be less reluctant to use them—and that Soviet leaders know they would be less reluctant—than their American colleagues in the early stages of war or ambiguous aggression [in Europe].”

Nuclear sharing has historically manifested in three main forms, the first and the least relevant of which involves nuclear planning. Nuclear sharing here comprises consultative mechanisms that allow allied policymakers to participate in
the patron’s nuclear planning. A case in point is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), initiated in the mid-1960s as a forum in which the United States’ Western European allies could make their voices heard on nuclear matters. The corresponding arrangement in the Soviet sphere was the Political Consultative Committee (PCC), which was meant to facilitate information-sharing and consultation among Warsaw Pact allies. Although such consultative mechanisms are the first that come to mind for many when the subject of nuclear sharing is raised, their function often tends to be more political and symbolic than anything else. Indeed, a strong case can be made that “nuclear sharing via consultation,” taken by itself, is nuclear sharing in name only. As historian Timothy Andrews Sayle observes, NATO’s NPG began as (and remains) a venue “for discussing, debating, and educating the allies about what is, fundamentally, US nuclear policy.”

More substantive nuclear sharing includes two closely related policy arrangements. The first of these is related to nuclear authority, involving the pre-delegation of nuclear weapons decision-making authorities to the commander of the patron’s forces stationed in the ally’s territory. This is usually accompanied by the forward-deployment of theater nuclear assets tailored to meet local military contingencies. Such arrangements should be properly included in the taxonomy of nuclear sharing because, as political scientist Julian Schofield notes, their practical effects are often “indistinguishable from other forms of nuclear sharing.” During the 1950s, for example, the Eisenhower administration gave the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) advance authority to employ nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack. The understanding was that he would use “the inherent right of a commander to defend his forces” to ensure the security of NATO in its entirety. During the months leading up to the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union pre-delegated discretion over tactical nuclear weapons to its field commanders in Cuba based on a similar reasoning.

The other policy leg of substantive nuclear sharing makes the patron’s nuclear weapons directly available to allied forces for certain nuclear operations—Schofield refers to these as “loaning.” In the late 1950s, key European allies were given access to US nuclear weapons under this concept. Historian Marc Trachtenberg thus writes that during the Second Berlin Crisis (1958-1962), “allied fighter-bombers on quick reaction alert were sitting on runways, armed with American nuclear weapons, ready to take off on a moment’s notice.” Additionally, intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) based in Europe during this
period were controlled by a “dual-key” system designed to enable launch upon simultaneously applying keys held by an American officer and a host-country officer. As President Eisenhower admitted, the system only afforded the United States “illusory” custody over the weapons because host-country forces could easily seize control of the American key “in a real emergency.” Such arrangements were deliberately contrived to increase confidence that the Europeans would have reliable access to nuclear forces upon the onset of hostilities. Indeed, Eisenhower’s goal was to “give, to all intents and purposes, control of [American nuclear] weapons” to the European allies, and for the US to “retain titular possession only.” The Soviet Union practiced more limited versions of such “loaning” arrangements with some of its Eastern European allies in the early 1960s.

Figure 1 summarizes the varieties of nuclear sharing policies, juxtaposing them against policies of “nuclear monopoly.” The common thread running through nuclear sharing arrangements is that the patron devolves significant nuclear responsibilities and assets to the ally in order to avoid “having the use of the weapons depend on a political decision from far away[,]” as US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles affirmed to French President Charles de Gaulle in 1958. A state that pursues nuclear monopoly, by contrast, puts a premium on controlling the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation by arrogating the alliance’s nuclear assets and decision-making authorities. For all intents and purposes, the United States has pursued policies of nuclear monopoly in NATO.
since the early 1960s. Upon inauguration, the Kennedy administration drastically curtailed SACEUR’s politico-military role and, in 1962, decided to fit all American nuclear weapons in Europe with Permissive Action Links (PALs) to ensure that they could only be employed with explicit authorization from Washington. These twin policy moves spelled the end of substantive nuclear sharing in NATO.21

Taking stock, major powers in the modern era have sometimes integrated important elements of nuclear sharing into their alliance strategies. This was particularly true of US policy in NATO during the Eisenhower period (1953–60) when nuclear sharing became the backbone of American grand strategy in Western Europe and manifested in its most substantive form. Informed analysts seem to have comparable policies in mind today when calling for nuclear sharing in America’s East Asian alliances. For example, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Wonsik Shin, South Korea’s former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advocates an arrangement wherein US forces would maintain nominal custody over nuclear weapons permanently based in the region, but their employment in wartime operations would be a joint affair.22 Should the United States introduce such arrangements in East Asia to strengthen deterrence against emerging regional threats? We delve into this question in the remainder of this article.

Questionable Military Benefits

The presumptive benefits of nuclear sharing boil down to enhancing the credibility of deterrence against an external attack on faraway US allies. As stated in NATO document MC 48, the 1954 strategic plan that provided the basis for US nuclear sharing in Western Europe, sharing arrangements aim to discourage the adversary’s policymakers from attacking the ally by convincing them that “[i]n the event of aggression … they will be subjected immediately to devastating counter-attack employing atomic weapons.”23

By now it should be clear that advocates of nuclear sharing tend to regard NATO’s nuclear strategy in early Cold War Europe as an ideal model (i.e., the “NATO model”). Thus, in order to evaluate the promise of nuclear sharing in today’s East Asia, it is worth comparing the military circumstances that prevail in the region to those of Cold War Europe. While many variables affect the robustness of deterrence, we focus here on two factors that have been featured most prominently in security studies literature: geopolitical conditions and the conventional military balance.24
Our comparative assessment suggests that the deterrence benefits of nuclear sharing in East Asia would be ambiguous at best.

**The Cold War Model**

The geopolitical conditions of contemporary East Asia differ markedly from Cold War Europe. During the Cold War, deterring a Soviet invasion across NATO’s central sector—that is, the German front—was the paramount concern.\(^{25}\) Unlike in the southern and northern sectors, America’s major allies in the central European theater were directly connected by land to each other and to the Communist bloc, confronting large-scale Soviet combat divisions.\(^{26}\) The central sector was thus considered especially vulnerable to a Soviet blitzkrieg. There was, moreover, a consensus within NATO that the Soviet Union posed the most significant national security threat to each member state. This meant that the inter-German border was regarded as the common frontline of the entire NATO bloc. The collapse of the German front, it was assumed, would result in a series of quick defeats inflicted on the allies by the Soviet army.\(^ {27}\)

This did not mean, however, that the geopolitical conditions of NATO’s central region were completely favorable to the Soviet Union. Crucially, the inter-German border was an obstacle-ridden terrain.\(^ {28}\) Upon the onset of conflict, the Soviet Union would have been forced to concentrate its invasion along three main avenues of approach (the North German Plain, the Gottingen Corridor, and the Fulda Gap), offering lucrative targets for counterforce nuclear strikes.\(^ {29}\) It was in this context that Washington pushed ahead with nuclear sharing policies in Western Europe. In September 1954, the United States began to deploy a large contingent of non-strategic nuclear weapons to the continent.\(^ {30}\) SACEUR was given advance authority to employ these forward-deployed weapons at his discretion, and the theater nuclear forces under his command were optimized to destroy invading armored columns. The expectation was that, under these arrangements, NATO would effectively function as an independent military actor during times of crisis. As SACEUR General Lauris Norstad remarked in the late 1950s, NATO under his command was to be a “fourth nuclear power” in international politics alongside the US, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom.\(^ {31}\)

The Soviet Union’s overwhelming conventional military power further informed the case for nuclear sharing in Europe. Apart from its numerical superiority, the Soviet army’s doctrinal emphasis on blitzkrieg operations made the threat of a “standing-start” invasion especially salient.\(^ {32}\) With the NATO forces in Western Europe at a marked conventional disadvantage, the only feasible way for the United States to defeat a Soviet invasion against its allies was to
resort to nuclear weapons. In order to disabuse the enemy’s optimism for a quick and decisive victory, MC 48 deemed it essential to “[d]evelop ‘forces in being’ in Europe” with “an integrated atomic capability … immediately ready to fight with maximum intensity on D-Day and in the early phases [of war].”\textsuperscript{33} If the United States was serious about supporting the development of such forces, it could not afford to be tight-fisted about nuclear weapons. As Dulles acknowledged, MC 48 clearly implied “that everyone should have an atomic capability.”\textsuperscript{34} This was the guiding logic behind the “NATO atomic stockpile” plan of December 1957, under which the United States pledged to “furnish nearly 3/4 of a billion dollars for modern weapons—mainly aircraft and missiles—for the forces of our NATO allies”; to train allied military personnel “in the maintenance, operation, and employment of these weapons systems”; and “to assure that atomic warheads for these aircraft and missiles will be available to NATO forces in the event of hostilities.”\textsuperscript{35}

As noted earlier, these policies were pursued with an eye toward handing over effective control of American nuclear weapons to the Europeans. When push came to shove, there was little to keep US allies in the late 1950s from independently deciding on nuclear escalation since “[a] nation that had reached the state of desperation in which it contemplated national use of nuclear weapons would hardly boggle at revoking a paper commitment [to consult with its patron] or seizing a key from the US technician.”\textsuperscript{36} The Soviet Union’s ability to rapidly overrun the central European front provided the military rationale for such arrangements.

\textbf{The Military Calculus in Contemporary East Asia}

There is no comparable rationale for nuclear sharing in East Asia today. Geopolitically, few US allies in the region are as directly exposed to the threat of large-scale ground invasion as the allies in Cold War Europe were. Japan and Taiwan, for example, are insulated by substantial bodies of water.\textsuperscript{37} Also in contrast to Cold War Europe, there is no consensus among America’s East Asian allies as to which state represents the primary external threat to their national security. Japan and Taiwan view China as their main adversary, while South Korea continues to focus its defense efforts on counteracting the North Korean threat. Complicating matters further are differences in the degree of aggressive intent harbored by these adversaries. China and North Korea, respectively, aim to politically subjugate Taiwan and South Korea through military means. By contrast,
China’s military aims toward Japan are widely seen as more limited, largely having to do with the dispute surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The lack of a common frontline in America’s East Asian alliances has important implications for the efficacy of nuclear sharing arrangements. Simply put, there are few plausible conflict scenarios between US allies and their regional adversaries that suggest a significant role for the pre-delegated theater nuclear forces and devolution of nuclear operational capacity to allies that are the hallmarks of nuclear sharing. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would involve a multipronged amphibious assault across the Taiwan strait. Similarly, potential flashpoints between Japan and China are expanding as the latter bolsters its blue-water navy and long-range air forces. Remarkably, even the salience of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) as a focal point for conflict on the Korean peninsula has diminished over time. Inter-Korean military collisions in recent decades have taken place just as frequently around the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea. In each of these potential conflict zones, nuclear retaliatory attacks would likely prove inadequate to halt or retard enemy incursions, since sea and air spaces feature few natural barriers that induce the concentration of forces. Instead, a Chinese or North Korean attack is more likely to involve dispersed formations that place a premium on evading air and coastal defense systems. Lucrative targets for discriminate nuclear employment are less likely to arise, undermining the value of rapid retaliation using shared nuclear assets.

In addition, East Asia’s overall conventional balance is much more favorable to US allies than it was in Cold War Europe, further decreasing the utility of nuclear sharing. Thanks to decades of modernization, South Korea’s conventional military forces today are capable of independently withstanding and repelling a North Korean invasion. The late General (Ret.) Colin Powell stated in a personal exchange with one of the authors that this was the primary reason he supported the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Korea in 1991, when he was serving as US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: “I didn’t think [a North Korean attack] would require a nuclear response[,]” he explained, “[r]emoving [the nuclear weapons] from South Korea did not create a strategic or tactical vulnerability.” Even today, he stressed, the North Koreans “know they would be committing assisted suicide” if they initiate a major military conflict against the US-ROK alliance. Likewise, Japan possesses an “air force that could defend its airspace from any realistic threat” and its “sea control capabilities are as good or better than most of the world’s great powers.” Japan’s present capacity for self-defense is thus more than sufficient to safeguard the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from Chinese maritime encroachment. Even Taiwan, arguably the weakest among America’s allies in the region, stands a good chance of thwarting a Chinese invasion attempt. In political scientist Michael Beckley’s words, many pessimistic assessments of the East Asian military balance tend to
“assume, implausibly, that Taiwan and [other US security partners] do nothing in their own defense and that the US military has to save the day single-handedly.”44 In fact, detailed campaign analysis suggests that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) “would have its hands full just dealing with Taiwan’s defenders” and that “the United States would only need to tip the scales of the battle” with conventional ordnance to decisively foil the invasion.45

The bottom line is that nuclear sharing is likely to prove gratuitous for most military missions contemplated by the United States and its allies in East Asia today.46 As described earlier, nuclear sharing in its Cold War heyday was predicated on the assumption that NATO could reliably “prevent the rapid overrun of Europe” if and only if “[t]he ability to make immediate use of atomic weapons is ensured … Any delay in their use—even measured in hours—could be fatal.”47 America’s East Asian alliances are not in a comparable military situation.

**The Political Dimension: The Risks of Nuclear Sharing**

Advocates may charge that, even if it adds little to military deterrence, nuclear sharing in East Asia might still be worth pursuing for political reasons. A nuclear sharing agreement would “place the ROK-US combined defense system in a tighter relationship of trust and collaboration,” South Korea’s former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued in 2019 during an interview with one of the authors, adding that “the US should take such proactive measures to reinforce security cooperation if it does not intend to outright abandon Korea in the long term.”48 Heginbotham and Samuels likewise believe that nuclear sharing would help reassure Japan and South Korea, steering them away from potentially more destabilizing alternatives such as indigenous nuclear development.49 If nuclear sharing could deliver net political gains by cementing strategic ties in the region and assuaging allied concerns, Washington might be justified in considering the policy despite its questionable military rewards.

Alas, it is doubtful that the political benefits of nuclear sharing in East Asia would outweigh its political costs. The central reason has to do with the provocative nature of nuclear sharing. Borrowing the words of political scientists Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, the fundamental problem for the nuclear-sharing patron and its ally is the “nonnegligible period of time between the decision to invest [in new capabilities] and the moment these capabilities become available.”50 During this time, an adversary made more insecure by its rivals’ moves toward nuclear sharing might be tempted to use aggressive military
and economic countermeasures to arrest their military cooperation. In short, nuclear sharing runs risks of triggering preventive aggression.

**Destabilizing Effects: Cold War Lessons**

Substantive nuclear sharing—comprising arrangements that devolve significant nuclear assets and responsibilities to allied territory—does not materialize instantaneously. In order to make the patron’s nuclear assets readily available to allies during times of crisis, the alliance needs time to arrange the transportation and storage of warheads, acquisition of new delivery platforms, specialized training for personnel, new command and control (C2) systems, and other elements of a robust “supporting infrastructure.”\(^5^1\) During this time, the adversary is likely to seriously consider forceful measures to arrest its neighbors’ moves to bolster their military capabilities. Such preventive countermeasures may include, among others, economic punishment, accelerated arms buildups, and military actions designed to incite escalatory fears. The risk is especially acute for states located in close geographical proximity to the adversary, and against whom the adversary enjoys a marked local advantage in relative power.\(^5^2\)

Several episodes from the Cold War illustrate this dynamic. A large body of evidence shows that US nuclear sharing policies played a key role in prompting the Soviet Union to launch the Second Berlin Crisis in 1958.\(^5^3\) In the years leading up to this event, West Germany had been in the process of “reorient[ing] defense planning toward smaller, combat ready forces equipped with the ‘most modern weapons,’” and there was a widespread perception that the Bundeswehr would “in due course have tactical nuclear weapons” as a result of US nuclear sharing policies.\(^5^4\) Throughout the crisis, Soviet policymakers made it known through various channels, over and over again, that their core aim was to arrest this military development before West Germany could, “with the help of the United States […] speak in a different tone.”\(^5^5\) The experiences of the Berlin Crisis encouraged US policymakers to rethink its nuclear strategy toward Western Europe; the administrations that followed Eisenhower pursued policies that were much more in line with the logic of nuclear monopoly than that of nuclear sharing.\(^5^6\)

Analogous dynamics were displayed during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. This time, the United States itself acted on the basis of preventive motivations. While still underappreciated among scholars, a key fear that motivated Washington’s efforts to nip Moscow’s nuclear deployment to Cuba in the bud was the possibility that, at some point in the future, Cuba might come to wield nuclear capabilities at the expense of US interests.\(^5^7\) This concern was articulated during the “Ex Comm” discussions of October 1962. Supporting his brother’s argument that nuclear capabilities in Cuba might dangerously constrain US freedom of action in the Western hemisphere, Attorney General Robert
Kennedy raised a grim hypothetical: “[Let’s say] in South America a year from now… [you have] these things in the hands of Cubans… [then] some problem arises in Venezuela [and] you’ve got Castro saying, [y]ou move troops down into that part of Venezuela, we’re going to fire these missiles.”

These fears were not unfounded. Declassified Soviet records show that Moscow envisioned a significant degree of nuclear sharing with Cuba. Although strategic missiles were only to be used under direct orders from Moscow, Soviet field commanders were given discretion over tactical nuclear weapons and expected to cater their actions primarily to local military requirements rather than to central directives. The original guidance issued to these commanders also stipulated that they were to train Cuban forces in operating the new weapons systems. Finally, the Soviets planned to eventually transfer nearly 100 tactical nuclear warheads and delivery systems to the Cuban army. Khrushchev’s idea—capturing the logic of nuclear sharing par excellence—was that deterrence could be enhanced by ensuring that “all the equipment is Cuban” in the event of a US attack on the island.

Suspecting such motives, US policymakers were ready to go to great lengths at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis to prevent this outcome. “The US government [views] with growing anxiety the increase in Soviet military supplies to Cuba[,]” Robert Kennedy told Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on the eve of the crisis: “How do we put such supplies to Cuba in perspective, following the line of logic? Won’t more powerful weapons that could reach the territory of the United States appear? Could these not ultimately carry nuclear warheads? The United States … cannot allow its security to depend on this or that decision of the current government of Cuba.”

Nuclear Sharing and Strategic Instability in East Asia Today?
Would nuclear sharing in East Asia similarly trigger destabilizing spirals and crises between US allies and their adversaries? Although a definitive answer is obviously beyond reach, hints offered by the region’s recent experiences are not comforting. A case in point is the so-called “THAAD Crisis” of 2016–17. Following a July 2016 joint announcement by Seoul and Washington that the United States would deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile battery to the Korean peninsula by late 2017, China lashed out against South Korea with economic sanctions and cyberattacks. Viewing THAAD as one component of a broader US strategy to weaken China’s deterrent capabilities, Beijing insinuated that the deployment would lead to a “regional arms race” and the “escalation of military confrontation.”

The crisis atmosphere in the region persisted until October 2017, when South Korea’s Foreign Minister pledged Seoul’s adherence to the so-called “Three
No’s”: (1) No additional THAAD deployments, (2) No participation in the US-led missile defense system, and (3) No development of the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral security cooperation into a formal military alliance. This episode was widely seen as a humiliating setback for South Korean foreign policy, not least by seasoned veterans in its policymaking establishment. As a former senior defense ministry official observed in an interview with one of the authors, “previous ROK governments had implicitly adhered to the substance of the ‘Three No’s’, but the THAAD decision and ensuing crisis had forced Seoul to “explicitly affirm such a position to China in a context of strategic uncertainty.”

China would no doubt see the strategic implications of nuclear sharing in the United States’ East Asian alliances as far more drastic than those of THAAD, which is why the episode is illustrative of the risks that could attend such a policy. Sung-han Kim, South Korea’s former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, alluded to these risks during a conversation with one of the authors: “The THAAD deployment merely concerned an individual weapons system, but China opposed it aggressively and our politics were thrown into chaos because of that. If we pursue force enhancements of a much greater magnitude [e.g., independent nuclear armament, redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, or ROK-US nuclear sharing], it would probably be difficult for us to withstand China’s blatant attempts at coercion unless the United States is willing to provide especially powerful assurances. In the worst case, it might lead to a serious situation in which we simultaneously lose American support and find ourselves on the receiving end of China’s wrath.” In short, nuclear sharing is likely to agitate local adversaries, particularly China, into taking hostile actions they might not otherwise take. Assessments of nuclear sharing proposals in East Asia must take this concern seriously.

Nuclear sharing could cause serious strategic rifts within the US-led alliance network

Risks of Intra-Alliance Political Discord

Another class of political risks would persist even if the United States and its allies manage to erect a functioning nuclear sharing arrangement in East Asia in defiance of regional opposition. Owing in large part to the divergent threat perceptions described earlier, US allies in East Asia would harbor different sensitivities toward the costs of nuclear escalation at different times vis-à-vis the United States and even with each other. Nuclear sharing is likely to accentuate these differences, potentially causing serious strategic rifts within the US-led alliance network. Cold War
history is again instructive. The heyday of nuclear sharing—that is, the second half of the 1950s—is not remembered as a time of exceptional strategic solidarity for NATO. Some allies feared that Europe might be turned into a nuclear battlefield against their will. Others (e.g., France) worried that sharing arrangements did not go far enough and sought to acquire an independent nuclear arsenal. For its part, the United States came to dread the possibility of unauthorized nuclear use by its allies in the event of a crisis.

If implemented in a substantive manner, nuclear sharing in contemporary East Asia would also be attended by serious inter-allied friction over the proper uses of nuclear escalatory threats. Consider a hypothetical military confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Should the clash escalate to serious proportions, Japan might be inclined to advocate nuclear use to defend its territorial interests, while neighboring states such as South Korea would be more sensitive to the risks of such action. By the same token, Japan and the United States might find themselves desperately trying to reign in South Korea from contemplating nuclear threats to deter Chinese military intervention in the event of a North Korean contingency. By decentralizing the potential loci of nuclear escalation decisions, nuclear sharing risks exacerbating strategic discord among allies rather than mitigating them.

Of course, if the military benefits are deemed sufficiently important, the United States might find it worthwhile to embrace these political risks and push ahead with nuclear sharing. However, we have shown that the military rationale for nuclear sharing in East Asia is unclear. Since there are valid reasons to suspect that nuclear sharing might trigger dangerous crises and undermine the solidarity of the US alliance network in East Asia, the onus is on the proponents of nuclear sharing to show why such a policy would be strategically sensible despite its risks. Indeed, although the “NATO model” is often held to be instructive for today’s East Asia, attentive readers would have gleaned by now that the politico-military payoff of nuclear sharing during its heyday in Cold War NATO was itself much more ambiguous than typically presumed.

Can the Risks of Nuclear Sharing be Mitigated?
Some may wonder whether the United States and its allies might be able to sidestep the risks described above by settling on less substantive forms of nuclear sharing—i.e., one in which allies participate in nuclear planning and training but Washington retains ultimate discretion over nuclear employment through centralized C2 systems and strict technical control over warheads. This watered-down form of nuclear sharing is essentially what NATO has been practicing since the early 1960s—a fact that has not been lost among more perceptive observers. As Duyeon Kim of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS)
points out, importing NATO’s present-day concept of nuclear sharing to East Asia would mainly be a “political and symbolic” move rather than a policy that “provides practical military benefits.” Nonetheless, to those who believe that even symbolic policies might meaningfully deter adversaries and reassure allies, less substantive nuclear sharing arrangements might appear as an attractive alternative.

We are skeptical of this approach. If the rationale for substantive nuclear sharing is unclear, it is even more doubtful how such half-measures would benefit US alliances in East Asia today. As political scientists Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press note, “[nuclear] weapons would still be firmly in the control of American leaders” under this weak version of nuclear sharing, “and hence no more credible [for deterrence] than other elements of the US nuclear arsenal.” It is “for good reason,” then, that interest in nuclear sharing of this sort is lukewarm among informed circles in both Washington and East Asian capitals.

Indeed, during the Cold War, America’s European allies harbored no illusions about the insultingly watered-down sharing proposals floated by Washington once it began to pursue nuclear monopoly in NATO. This, for example, explains the fate of the Multilateral Force (MLF) concept in the mid-1960s, which called for establishing a seaborne nuclear force operated by a multinational NATO crew. Although still couched in the language of nuclear sharing, US leaders privately acknowledged that the MLF was “merely a façade” meant to mask the reality of American nuclear dominance within NATO. Not surprisingly, the concept was scrapped by the mid-1960s due to lack of allied support. In Trachtenberg’s words, US policymakers had been foolish from the beginning to believe the European allies were “so much stupider than their American counterparts that they would be unable to see through all the talk and grasp what was actually going on[.]”

In the 21st century, America’s East Asian allies (and probably adversaries as well) will also see through the vacuousness of any “nuclear sharing” arrangement that does not give local military actors—field commanders and allied forces—a real ability to decide on nuclear escalation in desperate times. Any arrangement short of this defeats the purpose of nuclear sharing. Non-substantive forms of nuclear sharing might even leave US alliances in the worst of all possible worlds: provoking adversaries into aggression while allies remain incapable of harnessing its presumed deterrence benefits when needed. At the end of the day, then, the United States is confronted with a stark choice when

Watered-down forms of nuclear sharing might leave US alliances in the worst of possible worlds

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contemplating nuclear sharing in East Asia: pushing ahead with substantive nuclear sharing while accepting its serious risks, or dispensing with the idea altogether and working within the contours of existing alliance arrangements.

**A Flawed Proposal**

Strategic anxiety prevails in contemporary East Asia. Recent calls for nuclear sharing reflect a desire to forge a “game-changing” solution to this anxiety—a decisive measure to simultaneously reassure allies and strengthen the overall deterrent posture of US alliances in the region.

Our analysis casts doubt on this proposed solution. The logic of nuclear sharing—that is, presenting the adversary with the prospect of rapid nuclear retaliation at the outset of hostilities by devolving nuclear assets and responsibilities to allied territory—fits awkwardly at best with the core military missions of the United States and its allies in East Asia. At the same time, nuclear sharing may trigger serious political risks, such as stoking incentives for aggression on the part of regional adversaries as well as exacerbating strategic discord within the US-led alliance network. On balance, then, nuclear sharing is unlikely to be the security boon for the United States’ East Asian alliances as maintained by its proponents. Indeed, even a number of nuclear sharing optimists, such as Brad Roberts, have acknowledged the dangers of “simply importing the NATO model” of nuclear deterrence to the East Asian context.

To be sure, Washington can do more to ease strategic anxieties among its allies and reinforce deterrence in East Asia. In both public and private settings, US policymakers should strive to impress upon allies and adversaries that America’s nuclear guarantees in the region remain firm. Previous research, after all, suggests that declaratory nuclear commitments predict deterrence success much more reliably than forward-oriented nuclear assets and doctrines. Washington can also take steps to shore up its combined military exercises and troop deployments, whose traditional status as markers of US commitment and resolve in East Asia had been significantly weakened during Donald J. Trump’s presidency.

Finally, the United States can continue to lead the development of multilateral security coordination among its allies and security partners. Over time, we accept that such coordination may evolve to include mechanisms explicitly “tailored to enable nuclear-related crisis consultations among national leaders.” Furthermore, once established, these mechanisms might become a venue for allies to discuss and debate proposals for more substantive, “NATO-like” nuclear sharing arrangements. This is all well and good. We believe that nuclear sharing can and should be a topic of serious policy debate, and we
encourage the optimists to contribute further arguments in favor of such an arrangement in East Asia. But given the region’s current political-military environment, we do not believe a convincing case can be made.

Notes


41. Colin Powell’s private correspondence with Do Young Lee, April 9, 2019.


47. NATO Military Committee, “The Most Effective Pattern,” 242, emphasis in original.


56. For details, see Trachtenberg, Constructed Peace, 379–402.

59. “Memorandum, Malinovsky and Zakharov to Commander of Group of Soviet Forces in
60. “Memorandum, Malinovsky and Zakharov to Commander of Group of Soviet Forces in
Cuba,” 2–3.
61. See “Telegram from A.I. Mikoyanto the CC CPSU, and Gromyko’s Response,” November
63. Dobrynin diary entry, quoted in Fursenko and Naftali, Khrushchev’s Cold War, 453.
65. ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, October 31, 2017, quoted in Ji-young Lee, “The
Geopolitics of South Korea-China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-
68. For an excellent collection of primary documents on this point, see Burr, “U.S. Nuclear
Presence in Western Europe.”
69. See William Burr, ed., “Newly Released Sandia Labs Film Presents Story of U.S. Nuclear
70. See Taeho Kim, “Korean Perspectives on PLA Modernization and the Future East Asian
Security Environment,” in In China’s Shadow: Regional Perspectives on Chinese Foreign
71. Duyeon Kim, “How to Keep South Korea from Going Nuclear,” Bulletin of the Atomic
72. Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, “Should South Korea build its Own Nuclear Bomb?”
Washington Post, October 7, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/should-
south-korea-go-nuclear/2021/10/07/a40bb400-2628-11ec-8d53-67c8b452aa66_story.
html.
73. President Kennedy, in “Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 41,”
74. Trachtenberg, Constructed Peace, 314.
76. Fuhrmann and Sechser, “Signaling Alliance Commitments.”
77. For example, see Bruce Klingner, Jung H. Pak, and Sue Mi Terri, “Trump Shakedowns are Threatening Two Key U.S. Alliances in Asia,” Brookings Institute (blog), December 18, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/18/trump-shakedowns-are-threatening-two-key-u-s-alliances-in-asia/.


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