



PROGRAM ON STRATEGIC STABILITY EVALUATION (POSSE)

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Friends Don't Let Friends Proliferate in the Middle East or East Asia:

Lessons from South Korea and Britain

POSSE Policy Memo

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Over the past decade, the question of how to prevent nuclear proliferation in both the Middle East and East Asia has gained significant urgency. Apparently in part due to Iran's progress towards acquiring a nuclear weapons breakout capability and North Korea's acquisition of rudimentary nuclear weapons, several U.S. allies and friendly states appear to be at least opening the door to potential future pursuit of nuclear weapons.

In order to prevent this unraveling, U.S. policymakers have advocated for the extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella to these and other allied states. Extending the nuclear umbrella is intended to achieve two related goals. It is meant to dissuade adversary states from developing, threatening, or using nuclear weapons by negating any offensive gains they might hope to achieve. And it is meant to reassure allies placed under the umbrella and thereby reduce their motivation to develop their own nuclear weapons.

Recent academic research suggests that policymakers' intuition about the efficacy of security assurances is correct; on average, nuclear security assurances decrease an ally's likelihood of exploring, pursuing, and acquiring nuclear weapons. But, while policymakers and analysts appear to be correct that security assurances *can* prevent allied proliferation, much less is known about why some security assurances succeed and others fail.

Our research suggests that certain factors do increase the likelihood that security assurances will prevent allied nuclear proliferation. Examining South Korea in the 1960s, 70, and 80s and the United Kingdom immediately following World War II, we conducted an in-depth exploration of why U.S. security assurances prevented proliferation at certain points – and failed to prevent proliferation others. The conclusions found in this memorandum are based on that research.

The ally's perception of the credibility of the patron's assurance is extremely important; in both cases, South Korean and British perceptions of the credibility of the assurance – and the robustness of the overall relationship – played a major role in their proliferation decisions. The logic is straightforward: if the ally believes that the assurance is credible and that the patron is committed to the ally's security, it will be less likely to engage in proliferation activity. As both South Korea and the United Kingdom feared that the United States was becoming less invested in their security, they increased their proliferation activity. Only when the ally began to perceive that the United States was firmly invested in its security did it curb its proliferation activity.

This analysis also suggests that the devil is in the details when it comes to the proliferating-curbing effects of security assurances. The cases indicate that certain factors, such as troop deployments and reductions, can help determine whether the security assurance is credible – and therefore whether it is more or less likely to deter allied proliferation. In addition, as our analysis of the United Kingdom makes clear, even in circumstances where proliferation is highly likely, an assurance can – if coupled with these arrangements – still affect the speed and way in which a country proliferates.

We also find that the United States can use sticks in conjunction with its assurances to prevent allied nuclear proliferation. In the South Korean case, for example, the United States promised a re-invigorated security assurance, but coupled the promise with the threat that if the South Koreans kept engaging in proliferation activity, that it would put the entire bilateral relationship at risk. This combined carrot-and-stick approach proved effective and convinced the South Koreans to cease proliferation activity.

Our analysis of the South Korea and British cases may help policymakers craft assurances that make proliferation in the Middle East and East Asia less likely, and may also help them more accurately assess proliferation prospects even if their ability to affect these via assurances is limited. In other words, credibility will be a function not only of factors policymakers can manipulate, but of structural and other realities they cannot. And perhaps the most crucial take-away from our analysis of the South Korean and British cases is that the devil is likely to be in the details.