

America's Allies and Nuclear Arms: Assessing the Geopolitics of Nonproliferation in Asia

BY ROBERT ZARATE

While U.S. policymakers and lawmakers sometimes deeply disagree on precisely how to stop hostile states from getting nuclear weapons, they generally agree on the overall goal of nuclear nonproliferation with regard to adversaries. But what about the goal of nonproliferation with regard to treaty allies? If Japan, South Korea, or other U.S. treaty allies in Asia who are threatened by China's and North Korea's growing nuclear and missile threats, were someday to insist on getting independent nuclear arsenals, should Washington welcome or oppose them?

U.S. strategic thinking on this difficult and consequential question is at risk of becoming confused, and even counterproductive. Well-intentioned analysts today are wrongly framing America's rejection or acceptance of potential nuclear proliferation by allies in Asia as a stark choice between nonproliferation or geopolitics. A spirited exchange in *The National Interest* illustrates the trend:

- In a short and thoughtful essay, David Santoro of the Pacific Forum CSIS writes that Washington should choose nonproliferation over geopolitics, arguing: "In the face of Japan's and South Korea's nuclearization, the United States should cut them adrift because endorsing their decision (through a UK-like arrangement) or acquiescing to it (à la France) would be untenable."¹ He adds: "With nonproliferation now proscribed [sic] under international law, entrenched as an international norm, and given such a major focus on U.S. nuclear policy[,] not upholding [nonproliferation] for [America's] allies would be a nonstarter."²
- In a nuanced and thoughtful response, however, Elbridge Colby of the Center for a

New American Security (CNAS) counters that "geopolitics should trump nonproliferation." He elaborates: "American foreign policy should be—or, more accurately, must be—guided by elastic political judgment rather than marble dictates, steered by continual recalculation of how to pursue these core national aims in light of a changing international landscape[,] the dimensions of which impose the necessity of choices among goods."³

While Santoro and Colby deserve praise for wrangling today with a policy dilemma that Washington could face in Asia in a not-so-distant tomorrow, their debate rests on a deeply flawed premise—one that pits nonproliferation and geopolitics as rival and mutually-exclusive alternatives. *For the United States, nuclear nonproliferation is fundamentally about geopolitics.* Nonproliferation is not merely an abstract virtue or a feel-good international norm. Rather, it is a concrete reflection of how military power—in particular, a brute and indiscriminately destructive form of military power—is distributed internationally among the United States, its friends, and its foes.

Two geopolitical imperatives drive U.S. efforts to promote nonproliferation with treaty allies. First, when Washington works with allies to uphold nonproliferation, it is opting ultimately to preserve a distribution of military power that, in the face of competitive and resourceful adversaries, advances the security of the United States and its allies, and preserves their political cohesion and military interdependence.⁴ And second, when the United States extends its security guarantee against nuclear attack over non-nuclear-armed allies, it enables them to invest their scarce resources—which they otherwise might spend on independent nuclear strike forces—instead on critical conventional military capabilities, and thus to share better with Washington the

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alliance burdens of meeting more likely and pervasive less-than-nuclear threats.

When the United Kingdom and France went nuclear during the Cold War, these geopolitical imperatives drove Washington to pursue an alliance-based strategy that successfully persuaded other treaty allies—especially those in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) threatened by the Soviet Union’s superpower-sized nuclear stockpile—from getting the bomb. As U.S. decisionmakers confront the growing challenges posed by Asia’s complex web of antagonisms, they ignore, at the nation’s peril, the profound overlap between nonproliferation and geopolitics.

The Geopolitics of Nonproliferation in Cold War Europe

For over 50 years, Washington has successfully upheld nuclear nonproliferation within its system of formal treaty alliances. Indeed, no treaty ally of the United States has built nuclear weapons since the United Kingdom in 1954 and France in 1960.⁵ Still, the United States initially faced severe challenges in persuading other treaty allies in NATO from going nuclear after the British and French precedents. As U.S. decisionmakers today deliberate over how hard to push nuclear nonproliferation among allies and partners in Asia, it’s instructive to reflect on how their predecessors handled the issue of potential proliferation with respect to U.S. allies in Western Europe during the Cold War.

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After the United Kingdom and France went nuclear, Washington engaged in a fierce internal debate in the late 1950s or early 1960s over whether to encourage or prevent the emergence of more nuclear-armed NATO allies.⁶ After much deliberation, President Kennedy approved National Security Action

Memorandum Number 40 (NSAM 40) in April 1961, a presidential decision directive that endorsed the policy of dissuading further nuclear proliferation in the alliance by extending the security guarantee of the U.S. nuclear deterrent over NATO allies “if European NATO forces have been subjected to an unmistakable nuclear attack.”⁷ Indeed, NSAM 40 stressed:

“The U.S. should insist, in any such discussion, on the need to avoid (i) national ownership or control of [nuclear-armed medium-range ballistic missile] MRBM forces; (ii) any weakening of centralized command and control [by the United States] over these forces; (iii) any diversion of required resources [by NATO members] from non-nuclear programs [for alliance defense].”⁸

President Kennedy’s decision was profoundly shaped by the Committee on U.S. Political, Economic, and Military Policy in Europe—an advisory body chaired by former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and tasked by the Kennedy Administration to reassess relations between the United States and Western Europe. Acheson, along with the American strategist Albert Wohlstetter, an influential analyst at the RAND Corporation who served as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s representative on the Committee, authored draft policy guidance for the White House’s National Security Council that provided the basis for NSAM 40.

In a seminal 1961 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Wohlstetter, fresh from the deliberations of the Acheson Committee, described the sorts of geopolitical considerations that, in retrospect, would end up driving President Kennedy’s decision to prevent the emergence of more nuclear-armed NATO members or an alliance-wide multilateral nuclear force. First, the small nascent nuclear arsenals of the United Kingdom, France, or other NATO allies would face profound and expensive challenges in fielding nuclear forces that would be survivable and controllable in the face of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal. Wohlstetter, whose path-

breaking studies at the RAND Corporation for the Strategic Air Command in the 1950s clarified the operational requirements for second-strike retaliatory capability,⁹ wrote:

“The problem of deterring a major power [such as the nuclear-armed Soviet Union] requires a continuing effort because the requirements for deterrence will change with the counter-measures taken by the major power. Therefore, the costs can never be computed with certainty; one can be sure only that the initiation fee is merely a down payment on the expense of membership in the nuclear club.”¹⁰

Second, the addition of more nuclear-armed NATO members or even a NATO-wide multilateral nuclear force risked unravelling the political cohesiveness and military interdependence of the alliance, and potentially spurring American abandonment of its treaty-based allies. Wohlstetter elaborated:

“[O]ne of the most serious troubles with moves towards NATO or national nuclear strike forces is that they might weaken the American guarantee in the future. If either a national or a joint deterrent can really deter the Soviet Union, it is hard to justify an American commitment for this purpose. *If European nuclear forces should present merely a façade of deterrence, they might convince the American Congress even if they do not convince the Russians.* Then Europeans will be surrendering something of enormous value for something that may be worth little or nothing. Advocates of nuclear diffusion as well as proponents of a European strike force have in fact offered as bait the possibility of reducing American forces overseas. It might not need the next balance of payments crisis for the bait to be taken. Clearly, extensive withdrawal of the United States from Europe would not only reduce our immediate stake, but would make it easier for the Russians to level an attack which was unambiguously against

Europe and not against the United States” (emphasis added).¹¹



Albert Wohlstetter. Photo credit: *Life Magazine*

In sum, military-informed geopolitical considerations ultimately drove the United States to use the multilateral architecture of NATO to extend an alliance-wide American security guarantee against nuclear attack and thus persuade other NATO allies in Western Europe not to follow Britain’s and France’s decisions to get nuclear weapons. While this American policy faced many challenges, it ultimately held throughout the Cold War.

The Geopolitics of Nonproliferation in Asia Today

Among America’s treaty allies in Asia today, there appears to be a small but growing belief that the *mere possession* of nuclear weapons offers them a modern-day *deus ex machina* for meeting a broad range of threats by nuclear-armed adversaries. To cite recent examples:

- Soon after North Korea launched a nuclear-capable ballistic missile in December 2012 and conducted its third nuclear warhead test in February 2013,¹² a survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that 66.5 percent of South Koreans believe

Seoul should develop its own nuclear weapons.¹³

- In April 2013, South Korean lawmaker Chung Mong-joon publicly urged Seoul to consider an independent nuclear arsenal, arguing that “North Korea—and for that matter China as well—should know that South Korea has this option if [Pyongyang] persists in possessing nuclear weapons.”¹⁴
- In the aftermath of North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests, an April 2013 column in the *Japan Times* alleged that “the Foreign Ministry has been conducting studies clandestinely on potential development of nuclear arms.”¹⁵
- In March 2014, former Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan told journalists that “[i]nside Japan, and that is not only within the Democratic Party of Japan, there are entities who wish to be able to maintain the ability to produce Japan’s own plutonium,” adding: “They do not say it in public, but they wish to have the capability to create nuclear weapons in case of a threat.”¹⁶

The Indo-Pacific region is already home to two of the world’s five legally-recognized nuclear weapon states (namely, China and Russia) and three of the world’s four *de facto* nuclear-armed states (namely, North Korea, India, and Pakistan). Nonetheless, some U.S. analysts maintain that, if Japan or South Korea were also to build nuclear weapons, the United States could “manage” an increasingly-proliferated Asia. For example, Elbridge Colby writes that “[t]he crucial premise for this proposition is that proliferation *can be* tolerable, in the sense of something that one might not like but can be endured,” adding: “In the case of Japan or South Korea arming against a more ferocious North Korea or a more aggressive China, it seems clear that there are scenarios in which [the United States] would reasonably determine that tolerance of the ills of further proliferation would be justified by the greater good of maintaining our alliances.”¹⁷

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The diffusion of nuclear arms to America’s treaty allies in Asia, however, would present two interrelated sets of challenges for the United States and its security partners that would likely be very difficult for Washington to manage.

First, if Tokyo or Seoul were to go nuclear, they would likely find their expected atomic-age panacea for solving problems of national security to be more of a chimera—and an expensive one, at that. In particular:

- ***Decisions by Tokyo or Seoul to go nuclear would likely not diminish, but rather exacerbate, nationalist sentiments that have yielded already tense bilateral relations.*** The rivalry between Japan and South Korea today appears to exceed whatever animosity existed between France and West Germany during the Cold War. For example, Paris and Bonn, despite lingering antagonisms of World War Two, managed to hold semiannual joint Franco-German cabinet meetings after the signing of the Elysée Treaty in 1963.¹⁸ It would be difficult today to imagine Tokyo and Seoul doing anything comparable for the foreseeable future. Rather, the United States should not be surprised that, even if only one of the two closest Asian allies were initially to build nuclear weapons, that both would ultimately do so. Indeed, U.S. observers should expect to see Japan and South Korea competing with each other in building nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles—perhaps as intensely as each might compete with China or North Korea, if not more so.
- ***Japan’s and South Korea’s nascent nuclear arsenals would likely be very vulnerable to a disarming strike, especially by Chinese nuclear forces.*** For many years after building independent nuclear forces, both the United Kingdom and France struggled

with the dilemma of vulnerability to a preclusive first strike by the Soviet Union. On this point, the late American strategist Albert Wohlstetter keenly observed in 1961: “England’s cancellation of its costly program for the Blue Streak missile marked the conscious transition from a hopefully ‘independent deterrent’ to the much less ambitious ‘independent contribution to the deterrent.’ And it is not without reason—as [French public intellectual] François Mauriac has pointed out—that France’s first ‘deterrent’ vehicles will be called ‘Mirage.’”¹⁹ Indeed, vulnerability to a disarming strike would likely lead Tokyo and Seoul to divert increasingly more of their already finite defense funds towards investments to improve the survivability of their independent nuclear arsenals and their command-and-control, and thus away from procurements of critical non-nuclear military assets that would help to defend shared security interests with Washington. The net effect would be to harm Japanese and South Korean military cooperation with the United States in meeting more immediate and pervasive less-than-nuclear threats.

Second, the United States would almost certainly face more severe difficulties in “managing” the consequences of an increasingly-proliferated Asia than it did in Cold War-era Western Europe after the United Kingdom and France pursued independent nuclear forces. Amid the Soviet threat, U.S. decisionmakers successfully used the multilateral architecture of NATO to extend America’s alliance-wide security guarantee against nuclear attack that ultimately persuaded other NATO partners in Western Europe not to follow Britain’s and France’s decisions to get nuclear weapons.²⁰ In contrast, Washington today has only an uneven patchwork of bilateral treaty-based alliances and non-treaty-based security partnerships in Asia. The absence of a NATO-like multilateral security architecture in the region would vastly complicate America’s efforts to stem the consequences of allied nuclear proliferation. In particular:

- ***If Japan or South Korea were to go nuclear, their decisions would signal to the world not merely the decline, but also the profound weakening, of U.S. military power and geopolitical influence.*** No treaty-based ally of the United States has built nuclear weapons since France did so in 1960. The emergence of nascent Japanese or South Korean nuclear strike forces would mean that U.S. security guarantees against nuclear attack had fundamentally failed to reassure its most technologically-capable treaty allies in Asia. The upheaval of over 50 years of American policy against the nuclearization of treaty-based allies thus would strongly suggest that Washington’s geopolitical clout with Tokyo, Seoul and the wider Asia-Pacific had dwindled.

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- ***U.S. policymakers and lawmakers would face thorny decisions about how Japan’s and South Korea’s nascent nuclear arsenals would alter bilateral treaty commitments and cooperative military operations.*** A decision by Tokyo or Seoul to get nuclear weapons would be a world-changing event and, certainly at the outset, would harm both the cohesiveness and interdependence of their respective alliance with the United States. It’s likely that the U.S. lawmakers would harshly criticize any Japanese decision to repudiate its nearly 70-year prohibition on possessing nuclear weapons that stretches as far back as the Japan’s Constitution of 1947 and its *Atomic Energy Basic Law of 1955*.²¹ Congress would likely demand not only a fundamental review of, but also a significant revision to, the *U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Security and Cooperation of 1960*.²² Similarly, if South Korea were to go nuclear, American lawmakers would seek to fundamentally revise the *U.S.-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953*.²³ What’s more,

acquisition of nuclear arms by Japan and South Korea would very likely lead vocal constituencies in America's political Left and Right to support Santoro's recommendation to "cut them adrift".²⁴

- U.S. allies and security partners in Asia and the Middle East would use America's diminished military power and geopolitical influence as justification to pursue their own nuclear options.*** If Washington were perceived as acquiescing in any way to nuclear breakout by Tokyo or Seoul, then we should expect signatories of the *Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons of 1968* (NPT),²⁵ including some U.S. friends, to cite discriminatory double-standards and even quit the NPT. Likely candidates in the Middle East would include Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf security partners who are already threatened by Iran's drive to rapid nuclear weapons-making capability in violation of the NPT and numerous U.N. Security Council Resolutions. In Asia, candidates would include the region's many technologically-advanced and technologically-rising nations. Taiwan might be tempted to restart its reversed nuclear bomb-making efforts from the 1970s and 1980s. Australia, birthplace of the SILEX method of laser enrichment that General Electric hopes someday to commercialize,²⁶ may see prudence in developing, at the very least, a latent nuclear weapons-making capability. So might partners like Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam.
- China, Russia, North Korea and perhaps others would likely use Japanese and South Korean nuclear breakout—and any accompanying breakdown in the international nuclear order—as an excuse to proliferate, rather overtly, nuclear weapons-making technologies or nuclear weapons themselves to problematic states.*** Moreover, the United States could expect Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang, if not also India and Pakistan, potentially to ramp up the size and capabilities of their respective nuclear arsenals. In terms of strategic

nuclear forces, the regional and global distribution of military power would shift further against America's advantage. Nuclear war would likely go from being in the background of interstate conflicts in Asia, the Middle East, and other regions, to the immediate foreground. In turn, the worsening nuclear dimensions of the international security environment would gravely strain the formal security guarantees of America's treaty-based bilateral alliances and informal guarantees of its bilateral security partnerships.

In sum, if the United States were to acquiesce to Japan's or South Korea's independent nuclear strike forces, both Washington and its treaty allies in Asia would likely face an increasingly challenging—and dangerous—international security environment as more friends and foes sought to acquire rapid nuclear weapons-making capability or nuclear weapons themselves. While one could certainly make the academic argument that such a world could be "tolerated" by Washington, such a world certainly would not be preferable. To be sure, the American military of today would be ill-equipped and ill-resourced to meet the demands of an increasingly nuclear-armed Asia. As a consequence, U.S. policymakers and lawmakers would face hard choices in meeting the rising costs of "managing" matters of war and peace in an increasingly-proliferated world. Indeed, they may very well opt to retreat from it.

A Strategy that Links Nonproliferation and Geopolitics in Asia

Yet there is hope. For the United States and its allies, the near-term sacrifices required to avoid a nuclear-armed crowd in Asia are happily small and modest compared to the long-term costs of managing and surviving it. For example, as U.S. decisionmakers press Tokyo and Seoul to defer or, better yet, abandon civil nuclear activities that could yield weapons-usable nuclear material, Washington and its allies should work together to demand Chinese transparency about both its civil and military

nuclear efforts and missiles forces. China's criticisms of America's allies in Asia rings hollow when Beijing refuses to provide transparency about its growing nuclear and missile capabilities. Moreover, the United States should maintain fully-funded and modernized strategic nuclear forces. Washington should explicitly condition any further cuts to its nuclear warheads or delivery vehicles on corresponding treaty-based reductions by both Russia and China that are transparent and completely verifiable.

As worries about nuclear weapons in Asia grow—whether it be further proliferation by America's rivals or by its security partners—these concerns, upon deeper reflection, actually provide Washington and its treaty allies with an opportunity to link nonproliferation and geopolitics explicitly in their evolving alliances in the Indo-Pacific. It is an opportunity that U.S. and allied decisionmakers should seize, sooner rather than later.

Notes

¹ David Santoro, “Will America’s Asian Allies Go Nuclear?” *The National Interest*, January 30, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/will-americas-asian-allies-go-nuclear-9794?page=show>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Elbridge A. Colby, “Choose Geopolitics Over Nonproliferation,” *The National Interest*, February 28, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/choose-geopolitics-over-nonproliferation-9969?page=show>.

⁴ For the seminal statement of this argument, see Albert J. Wohlstetter, “Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1961), pp. 355-387. Reprinted in Robert Zarate and Henry Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics: Selected Writings of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), pp. 268-300, <http://www.albertwohlstetter.com/writings/NuclearSharing>.

⁵ While Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear arms and Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, neither is a treaty-based ally of the United States. Rather, U.S. Presidents have designated them *major non-NATO allies*. Both countries acquired nuclear capability long before being designated as major non-NATO allies.

⁶ For a succinct history of U.S. efforts to use a security guarantee against nuclear attack to dissuade NATO allies from getting nuclear weapons in the 1960s, see Robert Zarate, “Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter on Nuclear-Age Strategy,” in Zarate and Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics*, pp. 26-35. For an internal U.S. government study that proposed creating multinational nuclear-armed forces in NATO, see *The North Atlantic Nations: Tasks for the 1960s*, a report to the Secretary of State, August 1, 1960, SECRET, declassified on January 9, 1986, DDRS No. CK3100227683. Known as “the Bowie Report,” the study was authored by Robert A. Bowie, who served as Director of the Department of State’s Policy Planning Staff from 1953 to 1957.

⁷ *Policy Directive Regarding NATO and the Atlantic Nations*, National Security [Action] Memorandum No. 40, April 24, 1961, CONFIDENTIAL, declassified on May 4, 1977, DNSA No. BC02034, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ See especially Albert J. Wohlstetter, Fred S. Hoffman, and Henry S. Rowen, *Protecting U.S. Power to Strike Back in the 1950s and 1960s*, R-290, staff report, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1, 1956, TOP SECRET, declassified circa 1960s, <http://www.albertwohlstetter.com/writings/19560901-AW-EtAl-R290.pdf>

¹⁰ Wohlstetter, “Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country,” in Zarate and Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics*, p. 276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹² For example, see Eli Lake, “Exclusive: How North Korea Tipped Its Hand,” *The Daily Beast*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/15/exclusive-u-s-recovered-north-korean-rocket-head.html>.

¹³ Kim Jiyoung and Karl Friedhoff, “The Fallout: South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea’s Third Nuclear Test,” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, February 24, 2013, <http://en.asaninst.org/issue-brief-no-46-the-fallout-south-korean-public-opinion-following-north-koreas-third-nuclear-test/>.

¹⁴ Quoted in Shaun Tandon, “South Korea Lawmaker Brandishes Nuclear Option,” *AFP*, April 9, 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jWP5YLQzFpBOz4TUziPjdbC1069A?docId=CNG.bf3cf4ba81943df93db7b101f73afca9.331>.

¹⁵ “Nuclear Arms Card for Japan,” *Japan Times*, April 29, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2013/04/29/commentary/nuclear-arms-card-for-japan/#.UybwT4UaJAR>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Douglas Birch, R. Jeffrey Smith, and Jake Adelstein, “Plutonium Fever Blossoms in Japan,” Center for Public Integrity, March 12, 2014, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2014/03/12/14394/plutonium-fever-blossoms-japan>.

¹⁷ Colby, “Choose Geopolitics Over Nonproliferation.”

¹⁸ I am indebted to Henry D. Sokolski for pointing out France and West Germany’s regular bilateral interactions during the Cold War. For more on this subject, see Ulrich Krotz, “Structure as Process: The

Regularized Intergovernmentalism of Franco-German Bilateralism,” CES Working Paper No. 02.3, 2002, <http://aei.pitt.edu/9293/1/Krotz3.pdf>.

¹⁹ Wohlstetter, “Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country,” in Zarate and Sokolski, eds., *Nuclear Heuristics*, p. 276.

²⁰ See Zarate, “Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter on Nuclear-Age Strategy,” pp. 26-35.

²¹ See Government of Japan, *The Constitution of Japan*, May 3, 1947, http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html, and *Atomic Energy Basic Law*, Act No. 186 of December 19, 1955, <http://www.nsr.go.jp/archive/nsc/NSCenglish/documents/laws/1.pdf>.

²² See *Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America*, January 19, 1960 (entered into force on May 19, 1960), <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

²³ See *Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea*, October 1, 1953 (entered into force on November 17, 1954), http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/p_int_docs/p_rok_60th_int_14.pdf.

²⁴ Santoro, “Will America’s Asian Allies Go Nuclear?”

²⁵ *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, July 1, 1968 (entered into force on March 5, 1970), 21 U.S.T. 483, 729 U.N.T.S. 161.

²⁶ See U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, “GE Laser Enrichment Facility Licensing,” updated August 12, 2013, <http://www.nrc.gov/materials/fuel-cycle-fac/laser.html>.