

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2025



## The Center Will Not Hold

How an Order Ends

## Reviews and Responses

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*"Foreign Affairs...will tolerate wide differences of opinion. Its articles will not represent any consensus of beliefs. What is demanded of them is that they shall be competent and well informed, representing honest opinions seriously held and convincingly expressed...It does not accept responsibility for the views expressed in any article, signed or unsigned, which appear in its pages. What it does accept is the responsibility for giving them a chance to appear there."*

Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor  
Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

It is true that Gorbachev was a complex figure. But his “New Thinking”—a foreign policy approach that aimed to reduce the risk of war and open the Soviet empire to the world—and the sweeping reforms that went with it were driven by a personal quest to save the Soviet Union, as a result of which, in Gorbachev’s own words, he “gave” Poland back to the Poles, Hungary back to the Hungarians, and so on. He was not “forced” into those actions by U.S. President Ronald Reagan, as documents in Gorbachev’s archive make clear. Here is just one example, drawn from notes the Soviet leader made in preparation for his first meeting with Reagan, in Geneva in November 1985: “The most important thing is disarmament,” Gorbachev wrote. “This is a question of questions. Something substantial must be done, for this problem has become critical. . . . We must move toward each other. I am convinced that if we do not do it now, it will be even more difficult for others.”

In the end, Gorbachev couldn’t save the Soviet Union. But he did create a sense of a possible future for Russia, and thanks to his readiness to negotiate with Reagan, the fear of nuclear catastrophe largely disappeared. Today, such results in U.S.-Russian relations would be unattainable.

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV

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*Ferguson replies:*

Kolesnikov’s view is fashionable but silly. What was it that made Gorbachev believe that “something substantial” had to be done about disarmament and that the “problem” had become “critical?” The

answer is that Reagan had increased U.S. defense spending as a percentage of GDP from 4.8 percent in 1980 to 5.9 percent in 1985. (It peaked at 6.1 percent the following year.) The Soviet share of GDP spent on the military during those years was around three times higher—an unsustainable burden. Of course, grave internal pathologies lay behind the stagnation of the economy and the overspending on the military that had characterized the Soviet Union since the 1970s. But Gorbachev would not have risked such drastic reforms as glasnost and perestroika had the Soviets not been competing with a country that, under Reagan, enjoyed both a strengthening economy and a technologically advancing military. As Chris Miller revealed in his book *Chip War*, the Soviets simply could not match the U.S. revolution in semiconductors, which were the key to advances in precision weaponry. The Soviet strategy was “copy it.” They couldn’t. It was the realization of what that failure implied that propelled Gorbachev’s ultimately doomed reforms.

## South Korea’s Nuclear Fallout

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*To the Editor:*

Robert Kelly and Min-hyung Kim’s article “Why South Korea Should Go Nuclear” (January/February 2025) is deeply flawed and irresponsible. If South Korea and the United States followed its recommendations, nuclear conflict would become more likely, not less.

The authors blithely dismiss the impact that South Korea’s nuclearization

would have on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The NPT, which almost all countries have joined, has limited the spread of nuclear weapons over the past 55 years, even if it has not delivered disarmament. If a major economic player and G-20 member such as South Korea were to leave the treaty, which it would have to do to develop nuclear weapons, other countries would probably follow suit. The NPT would unravel, leading to more nuclear proliferation and thus increasing the risk that nuclear weapons will be used. Indeed, the only country to have left the NPT is North Korea—and when it did so, in 2006, it was rightly regarded as a rogue state, not as an example for others to follow.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the invention of nuclear weapons and the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many Koreans as well as Japanese people were killed or suffered lingering harm in those attacks. Last December, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo, an organization that represents the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Instead of advocating for more countries to develop nuclear weapons, leaders everywhere should heed the calls of those survivors to join the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which seeks to fully eliminate this grave threat to humanity.

DANIEL HÖGSTA

*Deputy Director at the International  
Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*

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*Kelly and Kim reply:*

Daniel Högstá suggests that South Korean nuclearization would lead other countries to nuclearize. This is unlikely. There is little evidence for such “cascades”; nukes have existed for 80 years, yet there are only nine nuclear powers. Countries do not decide on a course as controversial as nuclearization just because some faraway country did so first. Governments build nuclear weapons for the reason they do most things: to serve a particular national interest. South Korea’s nonnuclear neighbors have no such motivation because Seoul does not pose a threat to them.

Högstá fears the NPT would unravel if South Korea were to go nuclear. Yet if one middle power’s legal withdrawal for defensible reasons brought down the whole edifice, that would suggest the treaty was never strong enough to halt the spread of nuclear weapons to begin with. Högstá also makes no argument about why South Korea, specifically, does not need nukes. His generic case for disarmament is better directed at the largest nuclear powers—China, Russia, the United States—which are expanding their arsenals and keeping the threat of nuclear use alive. Nuclear parity between North Korea and South Korea would reduce, not increase, the chance that either country would use nuclear weapons. 🌐

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*Foreign Affairs* (ISSN 00157120), March/April 2025, Volume 104, Number 2. Published six times annually (January, March, May, July, September, November) at 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065. Print subscriptions: U.S., \$59.95; Canada, \$71.95; other countries via air, \$94.95 per year. Canadian Publication Mail–Mail # 1572121. Periodicals postage paid in New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Foreign Affairs*, P.O. Box 324, Congers, NY 10920. From time to time, we permit certain carefully screened companies to send our subscribers information about products or services that we believe will be of interest. If you prefer not to receive such information, please contact us at the Congers, NY, address indicated above.