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Liberal Norms or Coercive Counterproliferation: The American Response to Potential South Korean Nuclearization

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Do liberal norms impact nonproliferation when both proliferator and counterproliferator are liberal states? This question is underexplored in the nonproliferation literature which mostly conceptualizes counterproliferation through a realist lens. But the liberal community of states rejects the use of power-political methods like threats and sanctions among its members as illegitimate. Thus, counterproliferation coercion creates unique problems among liberal states: It is a normative violation of the counterproliferator's liberal identity and its claim to lead the liberal community. It also generates audience costs, like hedging, by the coerced partner and other liberal states who witness the coercion. These pressures create a principles-vs-interests trade-off: if a liberal counterproliferator coerces a liberal proliferator on behalf of its nonproliferation interests, it simultaneously contravenes its liberal principles. This paper integrates these insights into a 'liberal proliferation model' and applies it to contemporary South Korea-US tension over South Korea's nuclear aspirations. The empirical analysis finds that the model fits well, drawing genuine distinctions with realist-inflected, powerand- threats nonproliferation theory - including a looming principles-orinterests choice for America, because its efforts to dissuade South Korea from nuclearization have only partly succeeded. America has accommodated liberal nuclearizers (Israel and India) before, so it is unclear how it will respond.

Key words: *Nuclear Weapons, South Korea, United States, North Korea, Extended Deterrence, Credibility, Trump, Nonproliferation, Proliferation, Liberalism.*

How do liberal norms impact nonproliferation? If both a proliferator and a more powerful counterproliferator are liberal states, does their shared liberalism normatively preclude some counterproliferation options – specifically, coercion – and incentivize others? If so, what are the costs of violating liberal norms and how will liberal counterproliferators respond? For example, would

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powerful liberal counterproliferator America coerce weaker, liberal potential proliferator South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK), or would it accommodate ROK nuclear interest?

These questions lie at the heart of nonproliferation debates in international relations theory (IR), because they explore possible limits on counterproliferation, even as threats and punishment have evolved into common counterproliferation tools against illiberal proliferators. Coercion between liberal states is empirically unusual and violates our theoretical and intuitive expectations of liberal states' behavior toward each other. If both proliferator and counterproliferator were liberal states, coercive counterproliferation would defy "intra-liberal" behavioral expectations and likely generate controversy.

Nonproliferation scholarship has not much addressed normative constraints on coercive counterproliferation though – perhaps because coercion is a common nonproliferation outcome and implicitly condoned as forgivable if it halts the spread of something as destructive as nuclear weapons. But powerful liberal counterproliferator America has occasionally accommodated liberal proliferators vulnerable to coercion – Britain, France, Israel, and India – while it routinely tries to coerce illiberal proliferators. Similarly, global opinion would be shocked if America treated the two Koreas equivalently over their parallel nuclear interests. These cases suggest an undertheorized role for liberalism in nonproliferation. To address that, this paper makes three contributions:

(1) The paper emends nonproliferation theory's mostly realist, power-based framing of counterproliferation with liberal and constructivist concepts to capture the particularities of a "liberal proliferation dyad" (where both proliferator and counterproliferator are liberal states). Specifically, coercion within that dyad generates risks for the counterproliferator not present in its coercion of illiberal proliferators. Liberal states self-perceive as a community between whose members coercion is normatively inappropriate. Counterproliferator America also claims to lead that community. This creates a dilemma should a liberal state consider nuclearization. Were America to coerce it, per US nonproliferation interests, America would violate the norms of the community it seeks to lead, undermining its leadership claim's legitimacy and incentivizing liberal states to hedge it. Conversely, were America to accommodate the liberal proliferator, per liberalism's anti-coercion norm, that would contravene America's deeply held nonproliferation interest. The paper coins the expression the "liberal counterproliferator's dilemma" to capture this trade-off between the liberal counterproliferator's interests and its principles.

(2) These insights are used to craft a three-step, liberal proliferation model more nuanced than traditional nonproliferation theory's coercive template. Per liberal community norms, liberal dyadic players will discursively contend, using liberal-minded argumentation to persuade each other. First, the liberal proliferator posits pronuclear arguments. These are domestically persuasive and framed in language acceptable to fellow liberal states, because liberal proliferators will not

risk US and wider liberal ire without reasonably defensible, democratically validated claims. Second, the counterproliferator attempts to dissuade the proliferator with similarly liberal-minded counterarguments and policy reassurances. The high political bar already cleared by the pronuclear position, however, demands innovative, locally tailored responses by the counterproliferator. Third, should dissuasion fail, the liberal counterproliferator faces the coerce-or-accommodate dilemma sketched above. Because of legitimacy and allied hedging risks, coercion is not the self-evident choice traditional nonproliferation theory implies. Empirically, the United States has accommodated some liberal proliferation.

(3) The paper conducts a plausibility probe of this liberal proliferation model against a case: current ROK–US tension over potential ROK nuclearization. As the most active contemporary liberal proliferation dyad, this case is a useful first test of the model's fit. The probe finds the expected dense, liberalism-framed contention in the model's first two steps. It elaborates the pronuclear arguments and US counterarguments, finding ROK elite and public opinion unmoved by the latter. The model's third, coercion-or-accommodation step looms. Both options are counterfactually sketched, as America has not yet committed to one. Unlike traditional nonproliferation theory's prediction that America will simply coerce South Korea, this paper's liberal model finds that accommodation is credible possibility too, because US illiberalism raises regional legitimacy and alignment risks regarding China.

The paper proceeds as follows: The first, theoretical section situates the paper's arguments in the nonproliferation literature and develops the liberal conceptual emendations and model summarized above. The following, empirical section process-traces the ROK–US plausibility probe, finding enough model-to-case fit to recommend applying the model to other liberal proliferation dyads. The paper concludes with two research suggestions.

Theory: Nonproliferation and Liberalism

Literature Review

IR notes that powerful states often oppose proliferation.[1] They created the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the 1960s, and America, the most powerful state in the nuclear era, is also the world's leading counterproliferator.[2] The United States has punished would-be nuclearizers for decades. However, there

[1]Nick Ritchie, "Hegemonic Nuclear Order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the Power Politics of Nuclear Weapons," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 40–4 (2019), pp. 409–34.
[2]Francis Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: US Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security*, 40–1 (2015), pp. 9–46.

has always been controversy over coercing partners and allies.[3] Nuclear Israel, for example, is a close liberal partner and has never been punished. Nuclear India too is liberal and a hoped-for US partner; America dropped sanctions on it less than 3 years after its 1998 nuclearization. Such tensions are also present in the contemporary ROK case. This controversy motivates the paper.

Given America's counterproliferation efforts, a nonproliferation subliterature has risen to address it.[4] This paper begins in that scholarship. Coercion – sanctions, diplomatic isolation, embargoes, and so on – is a common American tool against illiberal and nondemocratic proliferators.[5] America has also occasionally targeted partners, such as Taiwan, 1970s South Korea, and West Germany. Yet the literature does not distinguish American coercion targets by regime type. Gene Gerzhoy speaks of "clients" (any US-aligned state) and "patrons" (the United States), and US punishment of nuclear-curious clients as "alliance coercion."[6] Nicholas Miller finds that US sanctions threats are most effective against states militarily and economic close to America.[7] Rebecca Gibbons finds a US diplomatic effort to pull all sorts of states into the NPT and a general consideration of coercion to pursue that goal.[8] There is no observation that liberal proliferators are, or should be, treated differently in US counterproliferation efforts.

This reflects the realist cast of most nonproliferation writing. The power differential between counterproliferator and proliferator is determinative. Threats drive up the costs of nuclearization,[9] and force may even be used if the proliferator is caught early enough, as in Israel's 2007 airstrike against Syria. Our popular image of proliferation is illiberal rogues like Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong-un battling counterproliferation sanctions and embargoes.

But this skirts any specific approach toward liberal proliferators, despite the admitted awkwardness of coercing US partners. For example, the counterproliferation tools America employs against North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) would be hugely controversial if employed against its Southern

[3]Newell Highsmith, "Would the US Sanction Allies Seeking the Bomb?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (20 April 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/04/would-the-us-sanction-allies-seeking-the-bomb?lang=en> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[4]Lewis Dunn, "Countering Proliferation," *Nonproliferation Review*, 13–2 (2006), pp. 479–89; Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), esp. ch. 12; Nicholas Miller, "Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions," *International Organization*, 68–4 (2014), pp. 913–944; Francis Gavin, *op. cit.*; Nicholas Miller, *Stopping the Bomb* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Gene Gerzhoy, "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions," *International Security*, 39–4 (2015), pp. 91–129; Rebecca Gibbons, *Hegemon's Tool Kit: US Leadership and the Politics of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[5]Lewis Dunn, *op. cit.*

[6]Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit.*

[7]Nicholas Miller, 2014, *op. cit.*

[8]Rebecca Gibbons, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–20.

[9]Solingen, *op. cit.*; Miller, *ops. cit.*

counterpart. We intuitively expect South Korea, as a liberal democracy and close US partner, to be treated better. As liberal scholar John Ikenberry writes,[10]

> The essential premise of American global leadership was that there is something special and enduring about the alignment of democracies. They have shared interests and values… it was a nascent political community – a community of shared fate. In this sense, the American-led order was, at its core, a "democratic alliance" to defend and support a shared liberal democratic political space.

The next section integrates Ikenberry's insight into nonproliferation theory.

Liberalism's Constraints on Counterproliferation

Liberal nonproliferation theory

The more liberal the players (proliferator and counterproliferator) in a proliferation dyad, the more legitimacy concerns arise over coercive counterproliferation. The illegitimacy of coercion is most acute when both players are established liberal democracies, like the United States and South Korea. As Ikenberry notes,[11] "the postwar liberal order was built around… norms of equality and nondiscrimination, thereby giving the order more legitimacy. And they would tie the United States more closely to its postwar partners, reducing worries about domination." Figure 1 illustrates the coercion legitimacy problem across possible proliferation dyads.

US coercion of another liberal state violates America's publicly stated commitments to a liberal international order (LIO). For example, the current US National Security Strategy speaks of a "rule-based order" and rejects "coercion, repres-

Figure 1. *Acceptability of counterproliferation coercion by regime type*

		Couterproliferator Regime Type	
		Illiberal	Liberal
Proliferator Regime Type	Illiberal	Legitimacy Irrelevant	Contested
	Liberal	Contested	Illegitimate

[10]John Ikenberry, "End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs*, 94–1 (2018), pp. 16–17.
[11]*Ibid*., p. 16.

sion, and… an illiberal model of international order."[12] Former President Joseph Biden[13] called America "a beacon to the world… [of] freedom, independence, [and] self-determination." This language creates normative space for weaker but liberal US partners to make choices America opposes.

Non-realist IR provides concepts to explain that space. Liberal scholars find that liberal and democratic states empathize and collaborate with each other.[14] Democratic peace theory notes that they do not go to war with each other and work out their differences without compulsion or threat.[15] Similarly, the security communities literature finds that the most robust security communities – where states do not fear war and do not plan for it against each other – are among liberal and democratic states.[16]

More broadly, policy-adjacent liberal cognates like the "LIO," "rules-based order," "liberal hegemony," "community of democracies," and so on capture our intuitive sense that there is a "logic of appropriateness,"[17] or a community standard of behavior, among liberal and democratic states which precludes coercion as wrong and antisocial.[18] In this constructivist framing, states' identity is at least partially derived from their social environment. That identity, or role, socializes them into expected behavior within their community.[19] So US identity aspirations – to liberal hegemony and leadership of the liberal and democratic bloc of states – come with expected social practices, such as engagement and persuasion, and a reluctance to

[12]White House, *National Security Strategy* (12 October 2022), at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf> (searched date: 29 August 2024), pp. 1–2, 8; Joseph Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on the United States' Response to Hamas's Terrorist Attacks," White House (20 October 2023), at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-unites-states-response-to-hamass-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[13]*Ibid.*

[14]John Ikenberry, *World Safe for Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[15]Michael Doyle, "Why They Don't Fight: Surprising Endurance of the Democratic Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, 103–4 (2024), pp. 135–141; Michael Doyle, *Liberal Peace* (NY: Routledge, 2011).

[16]Bruce Cronin, "Security Regimes: Collective Security and Security Communities," *International Studies Encyclopedia* (1 March 2010), at <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-296> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds. *Security Communities* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[17]James March and Johan Olsen, "Logic of Appropriateness," in Robert Goodin, *Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 478–97.

[18]Alexandra Homolar and Oliver Turner, "Narrative Alliances: The Discursive Foundations of International Order," *International Affairs*, 100–1 (2024), pp. 203–220.

[19]Matthew Hoffman, "Norms and Social Constructivism in International Relations," *International Studies Encyclopedia* (1 March 2010), at <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-60?rskey=LvJrDp&result=1> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

threaten, when controversies arise.[20] That reluctance is already evident in the very existence of allied nuclear debates. If power-differentials were all that matter, per realist nonproliferation theory, the US hegemon would simply quash allied nuclear debates with threats, as the Soviet hegemon did to policy challenges from the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War.

Applied to nonproliferation, these ideas suggest hitherto untheorized pressures against intra-liberal counterproliferation coercion. First, constructivism's focus on identity and appropriateness prescribes persuasion and accommodation by the counterproliferator. Benign treatment of weaker liberal partners conforms with the deep values which distinguish US hegemony from illiberal competitors like the Soviet Union or contemporary China. Intra-liberal coercion erodes that identitarian distinction – that the United States is a special, non-predatory great power – and the legitimacy of American claims to lead the liberal bloc.

Second, liberal theory suggests concrete political risks from intra-liberal coercion. Illegitimate coercion will generate audience costs in both the target state and larger LIO.[21] As Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon note,[22] disgruntled US allies have tools to hit back. A coerced partner can hedge. It can limit air, sea, or basing access, duck US hegemonic projects (such as confronting China or Russia), or withdraw from technology cooperation. Other liberal states also will witness US coercion and sense the hypocrisy of transgressed liberal commitments. Across the wider LIO, American bad faith will discourage liberal states who might already be wary of US leadership – such as France during the Cold War or India today – from closer alignment.[23]

These emendations to nonproliferation theory create a final twist on realist nonproliferation expectations – the liberal counterproliferator's dilemma. If a liberal proliferator will not be dissuaded and insists on its nuclearization rights, then the liberal counterproliferator might still coerce it. Realist nonproliferation theory expects that. But by the strictures of liberal IR theory, coercion would be a surprising choice. The good faith policy implication of liberal hegemony is accommodation of liberal proliferation. Importantly, this pathway to legitimated nuclearization is closed to illiberal proliferators; they do not enjoy the magnanimity of Ikenberry's special liberal democratic community.

A liberal proliferation model

The previous section's insights suggest distinguishing liberal proliferation dyads from others. In a mixed or illiberal proliferation dyad (cf. Figure 1),

[20]Ikenberry, 2018, *op. cit*., p. 16.
[21]Shuhei Kurizaki and Taehee Whang, "Detecting Audience Costs in International Disputes," *International Organization*, 69–4 (2015), pp. 949–80.
[22]Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, "Structural Dynamics of the US Overseas Basing Network," *Perspectives on Politics*, 11–4 (2013), pp. 1034–50.
[23]Patrick Porter, *False Promise of Liberal Order* (NY: Polity, 2020).

coercion is often acceptable. North Korea, for example, has been sanctioned repeatedly by the UN Security Council, not just by liberal states. A realist nonproliferation model explains that well; counterproliferators – mostly the United States and other democracies, but occasionally China and Russia too – uncontroversially use power politics advantages to punish Pyongyang.

However, the illegitimacy of intra-liberal coercion suggests a more complex process for a liberal proliferation dyad. Good faith intellectual and diplomatic contention between proliferator and counterproliferator – framed in liberal-minded language in order to persuade via shared normative referents – should precede any threats. Coercion should only be a last resort option, and not automatically or reflexively selected should dissuasion fail. To capture these intuitions, the paper proposes a three-step "liberal proliferation model." Those steps are:

(1) The liberal proliferator deploys pronuclear arguments framed in language persuasive to liberal-minded audiences at home and abroad.

A negative shift in the proliferator's security environment prompts an interest in nuclearization. This change must be substantial, because would-be proliferators are aware of America and the liberal community's opposition to proliferation. Liberal proliferators are also generally sympathetic to nonproliferation; nuclear-curious West Germany and South Korea were/are both in the NPT, for example. Thus, liberal states are unlikely to consider nuclearization for reasons Washington would find illegitimate or frivolous. Scott Sagan argues that states pursue nuclear weapons for national security, international prestige, or domestic coalitional reasons.[24] Liberal states are unlikely to pursue them for the latter two reasons. Gerzhoy notes that 44 percent of US allies have considered nuclearization, almost always for security reasons.[25]

IR suggests two reasons alliance clients would consider indigenous nuclearization: competitor states' nuclear weapons undermine patron extended deterrence[26]; and patrons can abandon their clients.[27] These concerns will almost certainly be facially valid to the proliferator's public and much of its elite before a proliferator publicly agitates for nuclear weapons. Given the alliance risks, liberal allies are unlikely to consider nuclearization unless they feel their national security is deeply threatened.[28] Consequently, the US dissuasion hurdle will be high.

[24]Scott Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?," *International Security* 21–3 (1996), pp. 54–86.
[25]Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*. p. 99.
[26]Scott Sagan, *op. cit*., pp. 57–63; Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*.; Matthew Fuhrman and Todd Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science*, 58–4, (2014), pp. 919–35; Stephen Walt, "It's Time to Fold America's Nuclear Umbrella," *Foreign Policy* (23 March 2021), at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/its-time-to-fold-americas-nuclear-umbrella/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[27]Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Stephen Walt, *Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Victor Cha, "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: United States, Japan, and Korea," *International Studies Quarterly*, 44–2 (2000), pp. 261–91; Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*.
[28]Etel Solingen, *op. cit*., pp. 272–73.

(2) A US dissuasion effort follows because of longstanding American nonproliferation preferences.[29]

US nonproliferation interests are mediated by liberal community norms. Those norms encourage the United States to debate the liberal partner rather than simply strong arm it, as realist nonproliferation theory predicts. As Alexandra Homolar and Oliver Turner note,[30] the "rules-based order" discursively recapitulates itself, generating and reinforcing norms of acceptable behavior through language. America validates its identity as liberal hegemon and bloc leader by debating weaker partners' claims even though it could ignore or suppress them.

Reassurance measures, such as consultation frameworks, new commitments, or military deployments, are conceivable US dissuasion gestures, because the proliferator's core concern is frequently extended deterrence.[31] The United States also makes nonproliferation arguments.[32] For example, the proliferator's withdrawal from the NPT might fatally damage it, or its nuclearization might spark reactive nuclearization. Importantly, these arguments operate within liberalism. The counterproliferator references values shared with the weaker, would-be proliferator. For example, the counterproliferator's offer of greater reassurance ties the liberal community more tightly together, and its arguments for nonproliferation serve LIO goals of predictable global governance of highly dangerous weapons.

Dissuasion may fail, however. Global nonproliferation concerns, for example, are likely unpersuasive to any state already desperate enough to consider indigenous nuclearization. Similarly, patron reassurances may not be credible enough to proliferator-state elites if local security pressures are exceptionally high.[33] And presidential final authority over nuclear release will always undermine American patron guarantees. As Stephen Walt writes,[34]

> Deterring a conventional or a nuclear attack on an ally by threatening to go nuclear—and convincing your allies that you really mean it – is… challenging. It is one thing to threaten to use

[29]Francis Gavin, *op. cit*.
[30]Alexandra Homolar and Oliver Turner, *op. cit*.
[31]Chuck Hagel, Malcolm Rifkind, and Kevin Rudd, "Preventing Nuclear Proliferation and Reassuring America's Allies," Chicago Council on Global Affairs (February 2021), at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/report_preventing-nuclear-proliferation-reassuring-americas-allies.pdf> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Bruce Bennett, Kang Choi, Cortez Cooper, Bruce Bechtol, Myong-Hyun Go, Gregory Jones, Du-Hyeong Cha, and Uk Yang, "Options for Strengthening ROK Nuclear Assurance," Rand (29 October 29 2023), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2612-1.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[32]Kurt Campbell, Robert Einhorn, and Mitchell Reiss (eds.) *Nuclear Tipping Point* (Washington: Brookings, 2004); Etel Solingen, *op. cit.* chs. 2 and 12; Scott Sagan, "Call for Global Nuclear Disarmament," *Nature* 487 (2012), pp. 30–32; Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (NY: Norton, 2012), chs. 2, 4, and 7; Nicholas Miller, 2018, *op. cit*.; Rebecca Gibbons, *op. cit.*
[33]Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), ch. 2; Vipin Narang, *Seeking the Bomb* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), ch. 2.
[34]Stephen Walt, 2021, *op. cit*.

> nuclear weapons to keep one's own country from being subjugated but quite another to do so to save an ally from defeat or domination. Or, as people used to wonder back in the Cold War, would a U.S. president really risk Washington or Chicago to save Paris or Berlin? Long after they had left office, a few former U.S. officials suggested the answer was almost certainly "no." Extended deterrence could still work because potential attackers can't be sure about any of this, but it still isn't as credible as deterring attacks on one's own territory.

(3) If dissuasion fails, liberal counterproliferator's dilemma arises.

Breaking with liberalism, the United States could coerce its liberal partner, per realist nonproliferation expectations. Miller speaks of sanctions threats as the "secret success" of US counterproliferation.[35] US coercion options are written into US law, particularly sanctions.[36] By leveraging national security and economic asymmetries,[37] America could likely block liberal partner nuclearization. But this risks appropriateness problems and audience costs before the liberal community of states, such as reduced trust, hedging, or outright defection on US leadership. For example, if the coerced state is geopolitically important to the United States, its alienation could complicate larger regional goals. And liberal states with anti-American traditions or who have traditionally hedged America for fear of domination – such as India, South Africa, France, and New Zealand – will find their normative suspicions of US hypocrisy and bad faith confirmed.

Alternatively, America may accommodate the partner's nuclear ambitions. There are several options: exiting the NPT is a first step. Ideally, that would shock the partner's local opponents into negotiations to prevent an arms race, halting further partner proliferation. Next is nuclear latency, in which the partner state acquires the necessary materials to break out rapidly but does not cross the weaponization threshold. Nuclear sharing or even gifting are options too. Ideally, these steps also would push local opponents toward negotiation. In the case of full indigenous weaponization, the resulting arsenal would likely be small.[38]

The US record on this coercion-or-accommodation choice is mixed. It has moved against German, Taiwanese, and (earlier) South Korean nuclear dabbling, as well as passing Latin American nuclear interest. Alternatively, the United States accommodated British, French, Israeli, and Indian nuclearization, as well partially democratic Pakistan's nuclearization. Where realist nonproliferation predicts coercion based on asymmetric US power, the liberal model is less determinative, because it forecasts unique costs to intra-liberal coercion.

[35]Nicholas Miller, *ops. cit.*
[36]Newell Highsmith, *op. cit.*
[37]Robert Kelly and Paul Poast, "Why the US can Get Away with Bullying Its Friends," *Foreign Affairs*, 101–2 (2022), pp. 131–43.
[38]Vipin Narang, 2014, *op. cit.*

Case: South Korean Liberal Proliferation

Mapping the paper's liberal proliferation model against specific liberal proliferation dyads would illustrate if its theoretical suggestions capture real-world effects. US–ROK nuclear contention is a good first case for a plausibility probe.[39] Both players are established liberal democracies. They have a long-standing alliance and deep social and economic ties. The above-theorized effects of liberalism on nonproliferation should be quite visible – unlike in proliferation dyads with illiberal or autocratic states (cf. Figure 1). ROK nuclear interest also post-dates the full emergence of American coercive counterproliferation tools in the 1970s and 1980s (mostly sanctions).[40] Finally, South Korea is more interested in nuclear weapons than any other US ally at the moment. All this makes it a crucial case.[41] If the model does not capture liberal-specific effects in this dyad, then it is unlikely to elsewhere.

Step 1. The Strategic Logic of ROK Nuclearization

The model predicts that a US-aligned liberal state will consider nuclear weapons only in response to a dramatic downside security shift. The spike in recent ROK nuclear discussion suggests that.[42] Two recent shifts stand out: first, in 2017, North Korea ranged the US mainland with an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). This jeopardizes the US security commitment to South Korea, because the US homeland is now at nuclear risk if the US fights in Korea. Second, in 2017, Donald Trump became American president. His comments on South Korea raised the greatest fear of US

[39]Jack Levy, "Case Studies," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25–1 (2008), pp. 1–18.
[40]Nicolas Miller, 2018, *op. cit*.
[41]John Gerring, "Is There a (Viable) Crucial-Case Method?," *Comparative Political Studies*, 40–2 (2007), pp. 231–53.
[42]Min-Hyung Kim, "Under What Conditions Would South Korea Go Nuclear?" *Pacific Focus*, 28–3 (2023), pp. 409–31; Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, "Five Futures for a Troubled Alliance," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 33–3 (2021), pp. 357–80; Lauren Sukin, "How Bad would a Nuclear-Armed South Korea Be?," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (21 October 2021), at <https://thebulletin.org/2021/10/how-bad-would-a-nuclear-armed-south-korea-be-let-us-count-the-ways/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Seong-Chang Cheong, "Case for South Korean to Go Nuclear," *Diplomat* (22 October 2022a), at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-case-for-south-korea-to-go-nuclear/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Robert Kelly, "East Asia's Nuclear Debates are Their Own," Foreign Policy (Fall 2022), pp. 14–17; Daehan Lee, "Case for a South Korean Nuclear Bomb," *National Interest* (22 September 2022), at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/case-south-korean-nuclear-bomb-204995> (searched date: 29 August 2024). Cf also: special issues of the *Washington Quarterly* ("South Korea's Nuclear Debate," 46–2[2023], pp. 109–60), and *Global Asia* ("A Nuclear South Korea?," 18–1[2023], pp. 6–61).

abandonment of South Korea in decades. South Korean pronuclear reasoning – both in public polling[43] and elite discourse[44] – reflects these pressures. Even President Yoon Seok-yeol has indicated nuclear interest.[45] This section process-traces the pronuclear arguments made in response to these two new risks.

Credibility and North Korea's ICBM

Since 2017, when North Korea tested an ICBM which could reach the US homeland, it has been reasonable to worry that America would not fully meet its ROK alliance commitments.[46] As Gerzhoy writes,[47] "when a patron's territory is vulnerable to nuclear retaliation by the client's adversary, doubts about the patron's willingness to risk nuclear devastation for the sake of the client will produce anxiety about the credibility of extended deterrence guarantees."

[43]Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," (February 2022), at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Asan Institute, "South Koreans and Their Neighbors," (16 May 2024), at <http://en.asaninst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/South-Koreans-and-Their-Neighbors-2024.pdf> (searched date: 29 August 2024), pp. 17ff.

[44]Min-Hyung Kim, *op. cit*., pp. 420–22; *Dong-A Daily*, "북핵특위 "北 핵실험시 NPT탈퇴·한시적 핵무장 등 제안키로" (14 November 2022), at <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20221114/116468501/1> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Ki-Moon Park, "북한 7차 핵실험, 위기이자 핵무장 자주국방의 새로운 기회," Korea Broadcasting News (13 November 2022), at <http://www.ikbn.news/news/article.html?no=152083> (searched date: 29 August 2024); *Washington Quarterly*, *op. cit*.; William Gallo, "South Korean Conservatives Lament 'Nuclear Shackles' Following Yoon-Biden Summit," *VOA News* (17 April 2023b), at <https://www.voanews.com/amp/south-korean-conservatives-lament-nuclear-shackles-following-yoon-biden-summit/7069107.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Jina Kim, "Washington Declaration Fails to Address Seoul's Nuclear Concerns," *East Asia Forum* (29 July 2023), at <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/07/29/the-washington-declaration-fails-to-address-seouls-nuclear-concerns/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); UK Yang, "Is South Korea Going Nuclear?" 38 North (3 February 2023), at <https://www.38north.org/2023/02/is-south-korea-going-nuclear/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Daehan Lee, *op. cit*.; *Hankyoreh*, "Increasingly Dangerous Risk of Trump," (14 February 2024), at <https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1128350> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Christy Lee, "Declaration May Not Ease Korea's Concern over US Nuclear Commitment," *VOA News* (28 April 2023), at <https://www.voanews.com/a/experts-declaration-may-not-ease-skorea-s-concern-over-us-nuclear-commitment/7071451.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024); NewsPim.com, "[김종원의 국방인사이드] 북한의 '핵 선제 공격', 한국 핵무장 신호탄 되나?" (20 December 2022), at <https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20220914000551> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[45]William Gallo, "Why South Korea's President is Talking About Nuclear Weapons," *VOA News* (16 January 2023a), at <https://www.voanews.com/a/why-south-korea-s-president-is-talking-about-nuclear-weapons/6919962.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[46]Jennifer Lind, "Extended Deterrence in the US-ROK Alliance," National Bureau of Asian Research (10 June 2023), at <https://www.nbr.org/publication/extended-deterrence-in-the-u-s-rok-alliance-adapting-to-a-new-threat-environment/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[47]Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*., p. 97.

French President Charles De Gaulle famously captured this fear during the Cold War when he asked then-US President John Kennedy if the United States would "sacrifice New York for Paris?"[48] ROK pronuclear writing brings up this dilemma repeatedly, with South Korea's largest circulation newspaper bluntly asking in 2024, "would the U.S. truly sacrifice New York to protect Seoul?"[49] As Walt pointed out above,[50] this is impossible to say with surety, and it is easy to imagine a US president flinching. It is known now, for example, that Kennedy was far more willing to bend to Soviet demands during the Cuban missile crisis than was reported at the time.[51] Similarly, Biden exercised persistent caution in aiding Ukraine in the Russo–Ukraine War for fear of Russian nuclear escalation.

This alliance-breaking logic is built into nuclear threats, of course,[52] and the reduced credibility of extended deterrence in the face of nuclear retaliation is a well-known problem in strategic theory.[53] Other US allies accept the ambiguities of imperfect American credibility without insisting on nuclear weaponization. South Korea, uniquely today, does not. Its agitation for nuclear weapons suggests North Korea threatens American alliance guarantees in a way other nuclear autocracies do not – namely, the greater likelihood that it would actually use nuclear weapons. There are three reasons for this. First, North Korea has higher incentives to use nuclear weapons than China or Russia – the other targets of US extended deterrence – because of its weakness.[54] North Korea lacks strategic depth and has a moribund economy which would struggle to support any protracted conflict. South Korea's conventional military edge is substantial and would be even greater with American support. Ironically, DPRK weakness incen-

[48]*Foreign Relations of the United States*, Document 30, Volume XIV, 1961–1963: Berlin Crisis, 1961–1962. (1961), at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d30> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[49]Min-Hyung Kim, *op. cit.*; Seong-Whun Cheon, "Case for Theater Nuclear Deterrence in South Korea," *Global Asia*, 18–1 (2023), pp. 16–21; Bruce Bennett, et al. *op. cit.*, ch. 2; Andrew Yeo, "Can South Korea Trust the United States?," *Washington Quarterly*, 46–2 (2023), pp. 109–25; Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, *op. cit.*; Seong-Chang Cheong, *op. cit.*; Seong-Chang Cheong, "South Korea's Independent Nuclear-Arming Option and the US-ROK Alliance," paper presented at the 2022 Forum for ROK-US Nuclear Strategy hosted by the Sejong Institute in Sejong City on 17 December 2022; Daehan Lee, *op. cit.*; NewsPim.com, *op. cit.*; *Chosun Daily*, "Korea must Prepare as US Shifts Focus from Denuclearizing N. Korea," (21 August 2024b) at <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2024/08/21/KQY6WRXWZ5GC7PMJ3KA3YOD6AU/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[50]Stephen Walt, 2021, *op. cit.*

[51]National Security Archive, "Cuban Missile Crisis @60: The Cuban Missile Crisis Cover-Up," (28 October 2022) at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba-cuban-missile-crisis/2022-10-28/cuban-missile-crisis-coverup-kennedy-adlai-stevenson> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[52]Matthew Fuhrman and Todd Secher, *op. cit.*; Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit.*; Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, *Myth of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 96–119.

[53]Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Scott Sagan and Kennth Waltz, *op. cit.*; Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, *op. cit.*

[54]Narang, 2014, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.

tivizes nuclear first use.[55] Second, a single major battlefield defeat would provoke an existential crisis for North Korea, unlike a Russian defeat in Ukraine or a Chinese defeat around Taiwan. The DPRK's ruling Kim family would have strong incentives to use nuclear weapons to block a US–ROK victory, because regime collapse would be imminent.[56] It would have little to lose. Third, Pyongyang has long signaled its willingness to use nuclear weapons. It speaks almost casually of nuclear use and routinely makes outlandish threats, including against the US mainland.[57] The DPRK's 2022 nuclear law reinforces this commitment, including possible preemptive use. And North Korea's threshold for nuclear release is lower than Russia's or China's.[58]

These three elements arguably make America's commitment to South Korea its riskiest alliance in the world. Because China and Russia are more robust, functional, and conventionally capable, their nuclear escalation thresholds are high. Only a protracted national catastrophe would likely induce their use of nuclear weapons. North Korea, by contrast, is one major, and predictable, conventional defeat away from nuclear use.

If high risk damages American credibility, so do low stakes.[59] Western Europe was of greater importance to US security during the Cold War than South Korea is to it today, yet de Gaulle still feared US defection. South Korea is a middle power distant from the continental United States; its loss would not directly reduce American security. Its post-Cold War geopolitical utility to America rests primarily on its proximity to China (discussed below). So it is uncertain how much nuclear risk America will accept to defend it. Ukraine – also a distant middle power whose defeat would not immediately threaten America – is a possible analogue. US hesitation in Ukraine's war with nuclear Russia (discussed below) suggests a comparable US caution in a ROK conflict with the nuclear DPRK.

Abandonment and Trump

The second negative shift motivating recent ROK nuclear interest is threat of abandonment by Trump. Alliance abandonment – by a patron of a client – is a

[55]Robert Kelly, "Why North Korea May Use Nuclear Weapons First," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (21 November 2023), at <https://thebulletin.org/2023/11/why-north-korea-may-use-nuclear-weapons-first-and-why-current-us-policy-toward-pyongyang-is-unsustainable/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[56]Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, "Return of Nuclear Escalation," *Foreign Affairs*, 102–6 (2023), p. 50.

[57]Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), ch. 1.

[58]Adam Mount, and Jungsup Kim, "North Korea's Tactical Nuclear Threshold is Frighteningly Low," *Foreign Policy* (8 December 2022), at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/08/north-korea-tactical-nuclear-threat/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[59]Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes are High* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), ch. 7.

well-established issue in IR theory, and a concern in US–ROK relations for the first time in decades. The US commitment to South Korea rests on an internationalist consensus in the Washington foreign policy community.[60] Post Trump, that consensus is no longer assured.

Trump has upended the Republican Party and its traditional internationalism. He clearly resents US alliance commitments.[61] For example, in 2024, he said he would "encourage Russia to do whatever the hell they want" in Europe, because NATO states were not spending enough on defense.[62] So concerned were South Koreans after that remark, that the ROK defense minister felt compelled to publicly address potential US abandonment.[63] During his first presidency, Trump stated his desire to "blow up" the US–ROK alliance if re-elected.[64] He also hinted at breaking the US–Japan Security Treaty.[65]

Further, Trump's remaking of the Republican Party will likely endure. He has so reshaped it that critics routinely deride it as a cult of personality.[66] Polling suggests that Republican voters agree with Trump's America First unilateralism.[67] Trumpist Republican disinterest in partnerships is already evident in Europe, where Republican opposition to Ukraine assistance has grown over the course of the Russo–Ukraine War. Even participation in NATO has become problematic for the Trumpized GOP.[68] For South Korea, this implies abandonment anxieties whenever a Republican holds the US presidency.

[60]White House, *op. cit*.
[61]Robert Kelly and Paul Poast, *op. cit*.
[62]Kate Sullivan, "Trump says He would Encourage Russia to 'Do Whatever the Hell They Want' to any NATO Country that doesn't Pay Enough," CNN (11 February 2024), at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html> (searched date: 26 August 2024).
[63]Joon-Ha Park, "US Won't Abandon Alliance with Seoul over North Korean Nukes: ROK Defense Chief," *NK News* (23 February 2024), at <https://www.nknews.org/2024/02/us-wont-abandon-alliance-with-seoul-over-north-korean-nukes-rok-defense-chief/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[64]Duk-Kun Byun, "Trump Says He Will 'Blow Up' Korea-US Alliance if Re-Elected," *Yonhap* (14 July 2021), at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210714000300325> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[65]Julian Ryall, "Trump's Complaints over Japan Security Treaty," *South China Morning Post* (27 June 2019), at <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3016345/trumps-complaints-over-japan-security-treaty-music-ears-china> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[66]Benjamin Goldsmith and Lars Moen, "Personality of a Personality Cult: Personality Characteristics of Donald Trump's Most Loyal Supporters," *Political Psychology* (2024) Early View, at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12991> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[67]Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Majority of Trump Voters Prefer the United States Stay Out of World Affairs," Chicago Council on Global Affairs (16 February 2024), at <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/majority-trump-republicans-prefer-united-states-stay-out-world> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[68]Max Bergmann, "A More European NATO," *Foreign Affairs* (21 March 2024), at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/more-european-nato> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

Scenarios: Ukraine and Korea

As noted, Ukraine is a possible analogue to South Korea and its nuclear dilemma. Both countries are middle-sized players in the American network whose loss would not directly impact US homeland security. It is unclear how much nuclear risk the United States will carry for such states.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has successfully deterred deeper NATO involvement in the Russo–Ukraine war with oblique threats of nuclear escalation. Western pundits were quite candid at the war's start that nuclear escalation fears were the reason for NATO to reject Ukraine's request for a no-fly zone.[69] Similarly, fears of provoking Russian escalation have consistently limited NATO weapons shipments to Ukraine.[70] There is a lesson here for North Korea: its nuclear weapons might inhibit US aid in a similar peninsular scenario.

Importantly, US guarantees to South Korea are formalized as treaty; NATO is not thusly committed to Ukraine.[71] The United States also has some forces on the peninsula in a trip-wire capacity. So perhaps the United States would more willingly risk nuclear retaliation to help South Korea than Ukraine. Or it might be chain-ganged into a Korean conflict by initial tripwire casualties. Both arguments suggest an automaticity to US involvement in Korea, what strategic theory calls "hand-tying"[72]: even if the United States did not want to fight, it would be pulled in anyway.

There are no historical data to corroborate a tripwire's chain-gang efficaciousness in a nuclear scenario. However, much strategic theory is skeptical, as was de Gaulle. Nuclear theorist Robert Jervis decried the "conventionalization" of nuclear weapons, in which their unique impact on military decisions, such as escalation, was overlooked.[73] The likelihood of one's country being struck by nuclear weapons, he thought, produces a dramatic risk aversion in decision-makers. Nuclear retaliation against the homeland was so terrifying – Jervis called it "armageddon" – that states would show extraordinary caution. US behavior in the Cuban missile crisis and the Russo–Ukraine War illustrates that caution. So does India's restrained response to

[69]Brian Finucane and Olga Oliker, "Zelensky Wants a No-Fly Zone. NATO Is Right to Say No," *New York Times* (25 March 2022), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/opinion/no-fly-zone-ukraine-nati-russia.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Eric Levitz, "Terrible Case for a No-Fly Zone in Ukraine," *New York* (8 March 2024), at <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/03/the-terrible-case-for-a-no-fly-zone-in-ukraine.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[70]Jacek Tarociński and Andrzej Wilk, "Arms Deliveries to Ukraine: Crossing the Red Lines," Centre for Eastern Studies (9 June 2023), at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-06-09/arms-deliveries-to-ukraine-crossing-red-lines> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[71]Matthew Fuhrman and Todd Sechser, *op. cit*.

[72]*Ibid*.

[73]Robert Jervis, *Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 18, 52.

repeated Pakistani post-nuclear provocations.[74] Kenneth Waltz found extreme caution so likely that he controversially counseled proliferation to keep the peace![75]

If this is correct, intense risk aversion to a nuclear strike, coupled to North Korea's high nuclear use incentives, undermine the automatic chain gang effect of the US alliance. And this uncertainty – what Thomas Schelling called the "threat that leaves something to chance"[76] – is enough to alter Seoul's strategic perceptions. As Gerzhoy writes,[77] even if the patron would meet its obligations, "the slightest possibility that the patron will renege on its promises has disproportionate effects on the client's calculations." This nicely summarizes the ROK pronuclear position: hope the Americans will fight but develop local deterrence in case they do not.

Step 2. Dissuasion and Nonproliferation

The liberal proliferation model predicts that the liberal counterproliferator will engage the would-be proliferator's arguments rather than simply quash them. It is sensitive to the illegitimacy of intra-liberal coercion. South Korea is normatively distinct from illiberal nuclearizers like North Korea or Iran, so it enjoys greater circumspection and respect for its sovereignty. Empirically, the model expects the United States to offer various reassurances in the spirit of liberal community and call for the maintenance of the NPT in a similar spirit of liberal order-making. Discursive engagement signals liberal leadership by according weaker liberal states dignity and equality with the more powerful counterproliferator.

The Biden administration tried this. It inked a reassurance agreement with Seoul in 2023 – the "Washington Declaration."[78] This was completed over a formal summit at the White House, and Biden and Yoon seemingly bonded well.[79] The Americans agreed to a "Nuclear Consultative Group" (NCG) – a South Korean idea for bilateral consultation on peninsular nuclear affairs – and that body has since meet regularly. US strategic assets – bombers and ships – have more regularly rotated through the peninsula for deterrence signaling. Track II dialogues have pressed American nonproliferation claims; Biden also likely pressed those concerns to Yoon personally.

Unfortunately for Washington, these efforts only ended the stated nuclear interest of ROK officials. Nongovernmental actors and public opinion still

[74]Vipin Narang, 2014, *op. cit*., ch. 4.
[75]Kenneth Waltz, "Spread of Nuclear Weapons," Adelphi Papers, 171 (1981) London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
[76]Thomas Schelling, *op. cit*., ch. 9.
[77]Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*., p. 102.
[78]https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/.
[79]Sang-Hun Choe, "After Warmth from Biden, South Korea's Leader Faces a Different Tune at Home," *New York Times* (29 April 2023), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/29/world/asia/yoon-biden-south-korea.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

voice support (covered below). Indeed, public support for nuclearization is at its highest ever, at 70.9 percent.[80] Persistent ROK interest despite US dissuasion efforts suggests that the ROK–US proliferation dyad is now between steps 2 and 3 of the liberal model. Their dyad is sliding toward the liberal counterproliferator's dilemma. To capture why a confrontation looms, this section process-traces American dissuasion arguments and ROK retorts.

Failed reassurance

But early 2023, the post-2017 downside shifts in ROK security had sparked a substantial South Korean nuclear debate. Approximately 70 percent of the ROK public supported nuclearization in separate polling by the Asan Institute and Chicago Council on Global Affairs,[81] and that support had exceeded 50 percent for over a decade. Substantial elite support emerged too. What was once a fringe debate achieved a critical mass of essays, op-eds, and other media coverage. Think tanks like the Sejong Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Korean Economic Institute held conferences on the subject. Yoon himself even hinted at nuclearization.

Liberal norms suggest the liberal counterproliferator's toleration of unwanted liberal partner debates. Accordingly, Washington did not repress the emergence of the ROK nuclear debate. Instead, it tried to dissuade Seoul from nuclearization via the Washington Declaration. A reassurance package structured by LIO norms of cooperation and compromise, the Declaration sought to meet Seoul's security concerns part way. It re-committed America to extended deterrence and pledged a massive US response to a DPRK nuclear attack. America agreed to the NCG and more strategic asset visits. The cost was South Korea's recommitment to the NPT, effectively ending any track I interest in nuclearization.

Unfortunately for the United States, South Korea's response to the Declaration was deeply ambivalent. There was widespread concern that America secured Seoul's recommitment to the NPT for too little in return.[82] South Korea's largest circulation daily newspaper decried American-imposed "nuclear shackles,"

[80]Asan Institute, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[81]*Ibid*., p. 18; Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *op. cit*., p. 2.

[82]Christy Lee, *op. cit*.; Hyo-Jin Lee, "Washington Declaration Means US Rejection of Nuclear-Armed Korea," *Korea Times* (28 April 2023), at <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/01/113_349938.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Sung-Yoon Chung, "Washington Declaration," Korean Institute for National Unification (3 May 2023), at <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/14342/1/CO23-16%28e%29.pdf> (searched date:: 29 August 2024); Choe, *op. cit*.; William Gallo, 2023b, *op. cit*.; Yulgok Kim, "It's Time to Revise the ROK-US Nuclear Agreement," *National Interest* (24 November 2023), at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/it%E2%80%99s-time-revise-rok-us-nuclear-agreement-207164?page=0%2C1> (searched date:: 29 August 2024); Siung-Lac Wi, "What the Washington Declaration Means," *JoongAng Daily* (10 May 2023), at <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/05/10/opinion/columns/Washington-Declaration-Yoon-Suk-Yeol-Joe-Biden/20230510203647982.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

lamenting that Yoon had "jettisoned South Korea's right to protect its sovereignty."[83] It has continued to insist, well after the Declaration, that South Korea needs its own nuclear weapons to blunt North Korea's advantage and for fear of US abandonment.[84] Conservative think tanks have continued to argue that South Korea should consider nuclear weapons.[85] Even the ROK left, traditionally skeptical of nuclearization, read the summit as US manipulation with no clear gains for South Korea.[86]

The core criticism – that Seoul did not get enough in return[87] – reflects the difficult problem, identified by Jervis and Waltz above, of hand-tying or alliance automaticity under nuclear threat. During the negotiations, South Korea tried to tie America into more specific commitments while America struggled to maintain wiggle room. Biden felt compelled to re-state that he alone has the authority to deploy nuclear weapons, while Yoon later claimed the alliance was "nuclear-based." Post-Declaration, Seoul talked up "nuclear sharing" in the alliance while

[84]*Chosun Daily*, "Korea Must Prepare for a post-Biden Future," (1 July 2024a) at <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2024/07/01/VY27C3RLNZBYXGSS4BGFRUPLCQ/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); *Chosun Daily*, 2024b, *op. cit*.

[85]Soo-Yeon Kim, "Korea Needs to Consider Nuclear Armament as way to Diversify Options against NK Nukes: Think Tank," *Yonhap* (23 June 2024), at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240623002600315> (searched date: 29 August 2024); cf. https://sejong.org/web/boad/22/egoread.php?bd=61&seq=6899 and https://www.sejong.org/web/boad/1/egoread.php?bd=60&seq=7460.

[86]Bon-Young Lee, "In Vying to be the US Favorite Ally, Korea has become its Subcontractor," *Hankyoreh* (12 May 2023), at <https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1091571> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Je-Hun Lee, "Washington Declaration is the Product of Mutual Distrust between Korea and US," *Hankyoreh* (3 May 2023), at <https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1090419> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Hyeong-Choel Shin, "Experts Predict Strong Backlash to Korean President's 'Enemies or Allies' Diplomacy," *Hankyoreh* (1 May 2023), at <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1090094.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[87]Jina Kim, *op. cit*.; Eunjung Lim, "Implications of the Washington Declaration and Changes in Indo-Pacific Nuclear Developments," Perry World House (19 January 2024) at <https://global.upenn.edu/perryworldhouse/news/implications-washington-declaration-and-changes-indo-pacific-nuclear> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[88]Jack Kim, "South Korea's Yoon Says Alliance with US is 'Nuclear-Based,'" *Reuters* (6 June 2023), at <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-koreas-yoon-says-alliance-with-us-nuclear-based-2023-06-06/> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Haye-Ah Lee, "Presidential Office Urges against 'Obsessing' over Use of Term 'Nuclear Sharing,'" *Yonhap* (29 April 2023), at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230429000200315> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Shewta Sharma, "Biden Issues Stark Warning on North Korean Nuclear Threat," *Independent* (27 April 2024), at <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/east-asia/joe-biden-north-korea-nuclear-test-yoon-suk-yeol-b2327913.html> (searched date: 29 August 2024); Duk-Kun Byun, "Washington Declaration will help Deter N. Korean Threat but Not a 'Nuclear Sharing' Agreement: US Official," *Yonhap* (28 April 2024), at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230428003200325> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

Washington talked that down.[88] The Declaration does not, in fact, commit America to use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea, nor to locally station or share nuclear weapons: "US officials have studiously avoided committing to the use of nuclear weapons in response to a DPRK nuclear attack."[89] Nor does the Declaration provide insight into how Washington would respond if North Korea threatened nuclear use if America entered a Korean conflict.

South Korean public opinion appears to sense this American hesitation[90]:

> Public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea remained unchanged at 53% (2022: 52.9%, 2023: 54.4%). This is despite significant developments in U.S. extended deterrence as part of the Washington Declaration over the past year. Public confidence further decreased when respondents were asked whether the United States would… use nuclear weapons even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself, with less than half of South Koreans (2024: 46.8%) expressing confidence.

These clashing interpretations and credibility questions are predictable when alliance commitment could mean nuclear retaliation. No amount of assurance or shared planning will displace the ultimate constitutional war-making authority of the US president. Fearing of Northern nuclear retaliation, America's president will always be able to hesitate and partially, or even fully, abandon South Korea. Trump only worsens this pre-existing problem.

Unconvincing nonproliferation

Where reassurance appeals to the liberal proliferator its dyadic relationship with counterproliferator, nonproliferation exhortations invoke its membership in the wider LIO, which values norms around very dangerous weapons. America has pressed these claims in track II alliance environments, but with little success.[91]

A common argument against any nuclear proliferation is that it would undercut the NPT.[92] South Korea, as a liberal democracy, would be a particularly

[89]Sangkyu Lee, Suon Choi, Adam Mount, and Toby Dalton, "Nuclear for Nuclear?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (27 June 2024) at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/nuclear-for-nuclear-understanding-divergent-south-korean-and-american-perceptions-on-deterring-north-korea?lang=en> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[90]Asan Institute, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[91]Robert Einhorn, "Should South Korea Acquire Nuclear Weapons?," paper presented at the 2022 Forum for ROK-US Nuclear Strategy hosted by the Sejeong Institute in Sejong City on 17 December 2022. I also thank Robert Einhorn and Duyeon Kim for extensive discussion of the US nonproliferation concerns raised below.

[92]Nicholas Miller, 2018, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[93]Lauren Sukin, *op. cit*.; Robert Einhorn, *op. cit*.

[94]Etel Solingen, *op. cit*., pp. 262–74; Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *op. cit*., p. 227; Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 17–18; Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*., p. 126.

devastating NPT departure,[93] because liberal democracies are expected to follow the rules. However, there is little evidence that the NPT dissuades states from building nuclear weapons.[94] The assertion that a ROK withdrawal would deeply damage the NPT is speculative. Several nuclear weapons state (NWS) are not in the NPT, and North Korea withdrew as well. South Korea would exit the NPT legally, and its 30-year, good faith effort to denuclearize the peninsula is, as Min-Hyung Kim has argued,[95] an obvious, easily explicable rationale for that exit.

A second nonproliferation concern, most notably expressed by Sagan,[96] turns on the transactional issues of maintaining complex, dangerous weapons. Sagan is particularly concerned that new NWSs might be irresponsible. But process and safety concerns apply generically to all NWSs. And South Korea has a long record of safe, well-maintained civilian nuclear power. More outlandish scenarios for new NWSs – such as a first-strike, loss, sale to rogues, and so on – are not credible in the ROK case.

A third concern is that ROK nuclear curiosity would exacerbate an east Asian arms race.[97] The US nonproliferation community worries about "reactive proliferation," where one country after another nuclearizes in a "cascade."[98] But South Korea's autocratic neighbors have already nuclearized, and Taiwan is unlikely to nuclearize because of South Korea. (Its security concerns are quite distinct, and South Korea is no threat.) The only credible regional cascade candidate is Japan given South Korean–Japanese tension and Japan's proximity to North Korea. But if DPRK nuclear weapons have not pushed Tokyo toward nuclearization after 20 years, ROK nuclear weapons are unlikely to do so either. And Seoul would initially only exit the NPT, not actually nuclearize. Both Japan and South Korea are long-standing US allies. Nuclear coercion against each other would break that highly valued American relationship. More generally, as Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro point out,[99] nuclear cascades are quite rare.

Finally, ROK nuclear options could accelerate North Korea's own nuclear program or sabotage a potential deal with the DPRK.[100] This is possible, but

[95]Min-Hyung Kim, *op. cit*., p. 417.
[96]Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz, *op. cit*., ch. 2.
[97]Van Jackson and Toby Dalton, "South Korean Nuclear Weapons would Make Things Worse," *Global Asia* 18–1 (2023), pp. 42–44.
[98]Kurt Campbell, Robert Einhorn, and Mitchell Reiss, *op. cit*.; Robert Einhorn, *op. cit*.
[99]Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, *op. cit*., p. 12.
[100]Robert Einhorn, *op. cit*.; Jackson and Dalton, *op. cit*.; Lauren Sukin, *op. cit*.; Mayumi Fukushima, "Time to Shelve Denuclearization and Negotiate a Halt to North Korea's ICBM Program," *War on the Rocks* (14 April 2022), at <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/time-to-shelve-denuclearization-and-negotiate-a-halt-to-north-koreas-icbm-program/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[101]Min-Hyung Kim, *op. cit*., pp. 418–20.

Pyongyang appears deeply committed to furthering its nuclear and missile programs no matter what Seoul does. Its nuclear development has been aggressive under Kim Jong-un.[101] Kim made no binding nuclear offers during his diplomacy with Trump,[102] and he has spoken of yet more improvements to come.[103] North Korea's threshold for use is low,[104] and the DPRK has stated repeatedly that denuclearization is impossible.[105] Thirty years of ROK nuclear restraint has not stopped this behavior. So it is highly unlikely that a breakthrough deal is imminent, only to be sabotaged by Seoul's NPT exit.

These rebuttals have convinced enough of the ROK population and elite, and support for nuclearization remains strong 2 years after the Declaration. The US choice to accommodate or coerce looms.

Step 3. The Liberal Counterproliferator's Dilemma

The liberal proliferation model predicts a good-faith, liberal norms-respecting dissuasion effort by the liberal counterproliferator. However, if dissuasion fails, the counterproliferator's liberal values are tested. At this point, the counterproliferator would have to violate the liberal community's non-coercion norm to halt proliferation. Liberal IR theory does not expect this behavior. Liberal values imply at least some accommodation – such as toleration for the client's legal exit from the NPT, or nuclear latency. The counterproliferator now confronts the "liberal counterproliferator's dilemma" – either to coerce its liberal partner in violation of liberal norms on behalf of its nonproliferation interests, or accommodate at the expense of its nonproliferation interests on behalf of its norms. Both choices are costly.

America and South Korea are not quite at this point. US dissuasion efforts did halt ROK government talk of nuclearization. But elite and public interest persists. Thus, the US–ROK proliferation dyad is now likely between steps 2 and 3 of the model – sliding toward but not yet at the coercion-or-accommodation decision-point.

Step 3 is therefore a "future counterfactual."[106] Future counterfactuals require durable ongoing trends to justify plausible forecasts. A US coercion-

[102]Robert Kelly, "Why Did Moon Jae-In's Unprecedented Detente Effort Nonetheless Fail to Change the Inter-Korean Stalemate?," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 34–2 (2022), pp. 183–205.

[103]Cha, Du-Hyeong, "Analysis on North Korea's Eighth Korean Worker's Party Congress," Asan Institute (17 March 2021) <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/analysis-on-north-koreas-8th-korean-workers-party-congress-pyongyangs-agony-hidden-in-the-feast-of-words/> (searched date: 29 August 2024).

[104]Adam Mount and Jungsup Kim, *op. cit*.

[105]Du-Hyeong Cha, *op. cit*.

[106]Steven Weber, "Counterfactuals, Past and Future," in Phillip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 268–88.

or-accommodation decision-point meets that requirement, because the two drivers of ROK nuclear interest – the DPRK nuclear and missile program, and Trump's abandonment threats – will almost certainly persist and worsen. The Washington Declaration papered over these cracks but did not resolve them. And crises accelerating ROK nuclear interest are easy to foresee. For example, Trump might withdraw US forces from South Korea, or North Korea could detonate a seventh nuclear device. The latter has already been suggested as a ROK red line for NPT withdrawal.[107]

Conversely, there is little to suggest these trends will reverse. Trump has been re-elected. Pyongyang has no known internal dissent advocating nuclear restraint. Sanctions may have slowed the North's nuclear march, but they did not stop it. Nor are they likely to be more efficacious in the future, as China and Russia scarcely enforce them. Missile defense is not mature enough to seriously reduce the DPRK missile threat.[108] The trendline of peninsular security is pushing toward the liberal counterproliferator's dilemma. The paper sketches both options.

Alliance coercion

Nonproliferation scholarship has identified US counterpressure as a critical determinant in allied nuclear decisions.[109] Miller notes the "secret success" of US sanctions threats against nuclear-curious allies if they are vulnerable to restricted Western market access. Gerzhoy similarly argues that alliance patrons can threaten clients with disalignment costs, if the client is militarily vulnerable and lacks other patron choices.[110] He details successful US coercion against even determined West German resistance.

South Korea is vulnerable to the coercive counterproliferation suggested by Miller and Gerzhoy. Like West Germany, it is a frontline state proximate to nuclear-armed autocracies. Its liberal democratic politics restrict its patron options, and the US is a major export market. American threat options against South Korea include: sanctions and restricted market access; a reduction or withdrawal of US forces from the peninsula; a ROK cut-off from the Nuclear Suppliers Group; and heightened visa barriers.[111] ROK elites are likely unwilling to risk such costs given wide South Korean support for the alliance.[112]

[107]Ki-Moon Park, *op. cit*.
[108]William Thomas, "Physicists Argue US ICBM Defenses are Unreliable," American Institute of Physics (1 March 2022) at <https://ww2.aip.org/fyi/2022/physicists-argue-us-icbm-defenses-are-unreliable> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[109]Etel Solingen, *op. cit*.; Nicholas Miller, *ops. cit*., esp. 2018, ch. 4; Gene Gerzhoy, *op. cit*.; Rebecca Gibbons, *op. cit*.
[110]Nicholas Miller, 2014, *op. cit*.; Gene Gezhoy, *op. cit*., p. 101.
[111]Nicholas Miller, 2018, *op. cit*., ch. 4.
[112]Asan Institute, *op. cit*., pp. 8–12.

But intra-liberal coercion potentially generates audience costs in the coerced partner and normative-reputational complications before the wider liberal community. Clients resent stark reminders of their subordination and can provoke alignment trouble for their coercer.[113] In South Korea's case, it could hedge the United States over China. Should Washington commit to full great power competition with China, then South Korea would be geopolitically valuable as a proximate liberal democracy with a pre-existing US base structure. A disgruntled South Korea could restrict air and sea access, shirk on Taiwan burden-sharing, or demand more generous alliance terms if the United States wished to remain in-country. The South Korean left is historically suspicious of the US alliance and wary of anti-Chinese alignment. It would be an initial domestic constituency for such hedging.

Coercion would also be visible across the LIO. The hypocrisy of violated norms reduces trust and reputation.[114] Bad faith transgressions undercut the normative distinction between US hegemony and autocratic competitors, an intangible asset in great power competition. Specifically in the US contest with China, potential democratic and semi-liberal partners across Asia – such as Indonesia, India, or Malaysia – have long avoided a close US relationship for fear of US domination.[115] Hypocritically coercing South Korea, a small, long-standing liberal ally, would validate those fears. Robert Einhorn, a long-time US nonproliferation official who has argued strenuously against ROK nuclearization, nonetheless predicts that the United States would accommodate it to avoid reputational and alignment costs with those desired partners.[116]

Accommodation

If coercion is well-studied in nonproliferation scholarship, accommodation is not – perhaps because of the literature's normative preference against the spread of nuclear weapons. But the shared liberal principles of a liberal proliferation dyad imply accommodation, because intra-liberal coercion violates the liberal community of states' logic of appropriateness. Importantly, this is a pathway, foreclosed to illiberal nuclear aspirants, to accepted nuclearization. The nonproliferation literature is blind to this, because it overlooks the legitimacy questions around coercion highlighted in Figure 1. Sketching that accommodation pathway is one of this paper's contributions.

[113]Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *op cit*.
[114]Patrick Porter, *op. cit*.
[115]Amitav Acharya, *End of the American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); Michael Fullilove and Ryan Neelam, "Australians are Wary of the US, but We Increasingly Fear China," Lowy Institute (5 June 2024) at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australians-are-wary-us-we-increasingly-fear-china> (searched date: 29 August 2024).
[116]Robert Einhorn, *op. cit*.

Politically, there are two recent exemplars of US liberal accommodation which could model a ROK accommodation. Liberal proliferator Israel has never been challenged by Washington, and India was sanctioned for less than 3 years before Washington accommodated. Geopolitically, those states were valuable, as South Korea is today, in a larger geopolitical contest. The normative awkwardness of sanctioning them would have been noticeable too: Israel, with its unique historical position in the LIO, and India as the world's largest democracy. India appears to have been sanctioned lightly to maintain appearances before returning to normal diplomatic relations with Washington; South Korea might experience the same.

Operationally, accommodation need not mean immediate weaponization. Indeed, Seoul has long supported nonproliferation efforts – it signed the NPT in 1968 – and ROK nuclearization threats would ideally spur North Korea to negotiate. ROK pronuclear writing retains the ideal goal of arms control and denuclearization.[117] South Korea would only escalate – from NPT exit to latency to weaponization – if North Korea refused to talk at each step. To prevent that final step, America might gift or share warheads. These nuclear steps would be public. Archetypal proliferation concerns about spiraling, unchecked programs cloaked in secrecy[118] – in Pakistan, for example – are unlikely in the ROK case, making US accommodation less politically fraught.

If built, a ROK arsenal would likely be small, per Vipin Narang's finding that regional powers build small stockpiles.[119] That too would make US accommodation easier. To achieve local nuclear deterrence, Seoul needs only a few dozen small warheads – because North Korea is small – on platforms which could ride out a DPRK first-strike. Submarines with medium-range missile capability would suffice, and South Korea already has them (Hyunmoo missiles and KS-III class submarines). Seoul does not need land-based missiles or bombers, or warheads in the megaton range. Its arsenal would not be designed for a first strike; its purpose would be post-American, independent deterrence.[120]

Conclusion

This paper asked if liberalism impacts nonproliferation, specifically if it impacts a liberal counterproliferator's nonproliferation behavior. It notes that liberal states reject the use of coercion among themselves, which norm is bolstered by liberal states' sense that they are a special community with standards restricting raw power politics among them. This suggests that when both a would-be proliferator and counterproliferator are liberal states, their contention over nuclearization will

[117]Seong-Chang Cheong, 2022b, *op. cit.*; Seong-Whun Cheon, *op. cit.*; Yulgok Kim, *op. cit.* The following paragraphs lean on conversations with ROK nuclear advocate Seong-Chang Cheong.
[118]Vipin Narang, 2022, *op. cit.* chs. 5–6.
[119]Vipin Narang, 2014, *op. cit.*
[120]Walt, 2021, *op. cit.*

be limited by liberal norms. By contrast, in a proliferation dyad with one or two illiberal states, norms against harsh measures are weaker.

The paper therefore suggests that intra-liberal nuclearization debates will be different enough that they should be analyzed separately – as a "liberal proliferation dyad." Unique liberal effects should be found in that all-liberal space, most importantly a unique trade-off: coercion of a weak liberal proliferator by a powerful liberal counterproliferator pits the powerful state's principles against its interests. Importantly, both options in this "liberal counterproliferator's dilemma" are costly. Where a realist model of nonproliferation expects the more powerful state to simply threaten the weaker one over an important interest, a liberal model expects a major counterproliferator effort to avoid open coercion, including a dissuasion program and, possibly, accommodation if the would-be proliferator persists.

Applying this framework against an actual case – ROK–US contention over ROK nuclear aspirations – returned a general fit between theory and practice. America has tried to avoid open coercion, has tolerated an unwanted ROK nuclear debate for years, and has tried to dissuade. But ROK opinion is unmoved enough that a defensible counterfactual suggests the principles-versus-interests choice looms. The model did, however, expect more US reassurance effort, such as restationing US nuclear weapons in South Korea, more clarity on US nuclear commitments, or fresh thinking on North Korea's spiraling nuclear program.

Future Research

Two areas for future research stand out. Theoretically, the principles-versus-interests trade-off could be refined. It is the most novel contribution of the paper, with little resonance in the traditional, realist-inclined nonproliferation literature. This paper suggests normative appropriateness problems and audience costs if the liberal counterproliferator violates its norms for its interests. But the concrete political costs before liberal audiences are easier to identify than the vaguer normative troubles. How liberal identity constrains the imposition of coercion could be enriched. For example, is liberal identity a psychological constraint on liberal leaders? Or perhaps a bureaucratic one in liberal states' domestic coalitions? Empirically, the next step is to apply this model to other liberal, nuclear-curious US partners. South Korea was a good plausibility probe because it fit the model's required parameters (two close liberal allies actively disagreeing over nuclearization). But applying it more widely would further test the paper's contention that liberal proliferation dyads are distinct enough to merit separate analysis. Two potential cases are post-war Ukraine and Poland. Both are liberal US partners near a menacing nuclear power and fearful of Trumpian abandonment.

Conflicts of Interest

I have no conflicts of interest.

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