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Preventing an Era of Nuclear Anarchy: Nuclear Proliferation and American Security

Report of the Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation and U.S. National Security

The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Nuclear Threat Initiative formed the Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation and U.S. National Security to identify and explore emerging nuclear proliferation challenges; assess the relative importance of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as a strategic objective in U.S. national security policy; evaluate various policy options and their implications; and make consensus recommendations to guide future U.S. policy. This summary captures the Task Force's findings and recommendations.

A confluence of evolving threats and changing technologies is increasing the risks that more countries will seek nuclear weapons or the means to produce them in the near future. And in a moment of renewed proliferation potential, many of the tools and mechanisms the United States has traditionally relied upon to combat the spread of nuclear weapons are becoming less effective. These developments, and the attendant security risks they produce, warrant revisions to U.S. anti-proliferation strategy.

Task Force Findings

- Nuclear acquisition by any state, friend or foe, would diminish U.S. power and influence and inject additional uncertainty into an already fraught geopolitical landscape. More states with nuclear weapons means higher risk of nuclear use.
- Preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons is central to U.S. national security and should remain a top priority; the United States should

consistently and vigorously oppose proliferation to any state.

- U.S. strategy should not be oriented only toward preventing adversaries from acquiring nuclear weapons, but should also be equipped to address the potential nuclear weapons ambitions of U.S. allies and partners.
- Efforts to prevent proliferation in specific cases are more likely to succeed if anchored in internationally recognized principles, practices, and institutions and backed by a coherent U.S. strategy.
- The existing architecture for preventing proliferation remains integral to U.S. strategy, but Washington must spearhead efforts to modernize and strengthen institutions and tools to anticipate future needs. Such efforts will be more effective, and will come at a lower cost (financially and politically), if the United States works with other countries.



To read the full report, visit <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/preventing-nuclear-anarchy-nuclear-proliferation-and-american-security>.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

With the above principles as a guide, the Task Force urges the United States to pursue a revitalized strategy for combating proliferation based on five pillars. These are not listed in order of importance and aspects of each will be critical for success going forward.

ABOUT THE TASK FORCE

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in nuclear weapons and nuclear risks. It also should uphold the nuclear testing moratorium, engage states in the Global South on nuclear energy and disarmament issues, and lead a coalition to increase support for the International Atomic Energy Agency.

4. **Revitalizing U.S. nuclear exports to enhance nonproliferation:** Demand for electricity is surging. Regaining a U.S. leadership position in the global nuclear energy market can deliver benefits for non-proliferation compliance, bolster American competitiveness vis-à-vis Russia and China, and facilitate long-term partnerships across the globe. This will require more coherent whole-of-government support to overcome significant obstacles to domestic nuclear energy renewal, including by providing financing and technical backing for strategic energy partnerships, a stronger base of domestic U.S. nuclear power projects, and credible alternatives to enrichment and reprocessing activities by partner countries.
5. **Strengthening the foundations for U.S. leadership:** U.S. interests in combating proliferation must be matched by robust governmental investment in the diplomatic, economic, military, and technological tools that underpin the U.S. ability to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and bolster the nonproliferation architecture. This will require more focused investment in emerging technologies and applications to enhance detection and monitoring, recruitment and retention of the next generation of nuclear weapons experts throughout the U.S. government, updated sanctions authorities, and strong U.S. nuclear and conventional military capabilities.

The Task Force report provides a bipartisan blueprint for how the United States can navigate nuclear proliferation dangers amid uncertainty and change over decades to come. Our work has left us with no illusions about the difficulty of the task. The United States can rise to the challenge.

1. **Crafting a new extended deterrence compact with allies:** Robust partnerships remain critical to dissuading allies from seeking nuclear weapons, as well as other U.S. national security priorities. But to remain viable, extended deterrence must evolve beyond its Cold War foundations. The United States should bolster alliance assurances and better augment and integrate allied conventional military and missile defense capabilities as part of a more equitable and effective division of responsibilities. Washington should also remind its allies of the risks inherent in proliferation.
2. **Pursuing pragmatic diplomacy with China and Russia:** Cooperation between the United States and Russia on nuclear issues has come to nearly a complete halt, and tensions between the United States and China remain significant amid the latter's nuclear build up. Recognizing the real contemporary limits, there may still be openings to leverage shared concerns about the spread of nuclear weapons and avert further harm to nonproliferation tools and institutions. Policymakers should also be prepared to capitalize on geopolitical shifts that may open new opportunities, particularly with China—a major power with growing global interests.
3. **Upholding the nonproliferation “grand bargains”:** Most states do not desire nuclear weapons, and their compliance remains central to a durable Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and an effective nonproliferation system. To sustain international buy-in to the numerous international regimes, institutions, and tools the United States relies on to combat nuclear proliferation, Washington should bolster its own efforts to negotiate reductions