

# Will Donald Trump Overturn US Nuclear Non-proliferation Posture?

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## Abstract

*For over 60 years, the United States has led global efforts to stem the expansion of nuclear weapons, an effort that has succeeded in keeping the number of nuclear-armed states to single digits rather than the 25 that were once direly forecast. For most of this period, the non-proliferation regime has been comprised of treaties, conventions and bilateral agreements, formal arrangements that offered legitimacy at the cost of least-common denominator compromises. More recently, the US has favored non-proliferation action through the 15-member UN Security Council and via ad-hoc coalitions of like-minded states. The US has also applied unilateral pressure. These efforts have been directed not just against US adversaries, but also vis-à-vis its friends, including the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, both of which were persuaded to stop their pursuit of plutonium-based nuclear weapons. The US failed to stop Israel, however, as well as India, Pakistan and, of most concern, North Korea. The Iran case may be instructive in fashioning a policy to denuclearize North Korea. US policy is largely focused on sanctions, which have finally reached the intensity of sanctions that were applied against Iran and third parties that engaged with designated Iranian entities. In the case of Iran, which is more susceptible to pressure than North Korea, it took at least a year and a half before severe sanctions contributed to serious negotiations on a deal. But the Iranian deal did not come about solely as the result of severe sanctions. It also took a willingness on both sides to accept compromises. In the coming months, sanctions and other forms of pressure on North Korea will be sharpened. The worst response would be for the ROK and Japan also to seek nuclear weapons. As in the Iran case, incentives should be considered among the tools in the non-proliferation toolbox.*

**Key Words:** Nuclear Weapons, Non-proliferation, Iran, North Korea, Sanctions

## Introduction<sup>1)</sup>

Over the past six decades, the United States has led the international initiatives that have kept the number of nuclear-armed countries from expanding beyond single

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digits. Whether US President-elect Donald Trump will continue this non-proliferation posture is now under question, given some of the statements he made on the campaign trail, which he later rescinded. North Korea presents the most worrisome challenge to the non-proliferation regime. If the US does not uphold the credibility of its security assurances, North Korea's nuclear threat could see South Korea itself renew a pursuit of nuclear weapons and lead to an unravelling of the non-proliferation regime.

## **US non-proliferation leadership role**

For over 60 years, the United States has led global efforts to stem the expansion of nuclear weapons, using a creative mix of policy tools to dissuade both antagonists and partners to desist from developing nuclear weapons. But presidents do matter in the initiation and implementation of policies to reinforce this posture. Which non-proliferation tools the incoming Trump administration will favor is too early to say, and, as discussed below, there is even some question as to whether he will prioritize non-proliferation at all.

US non-proliferation efforts started soon after World War Two. In 1946, the US proposed the so-called Baruch Plan, under which its nuclear weapons would be turned over to the United Nations if all other nations pledged not to produce them and agreed to strong verification measures. Although the Soviet Union vetoed the proposal, the US continued to advance other means of non-proliferation. In 1953, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed the creation of an international agency to both promote and control the use of nuclear energy. Four years later the UN established the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was assigned the task of applying safeguards to verify that declared nuclear facilities were used exclusively for peaceful purposes. With the nuclear club expanding to five in the 1960s, the US led efforts to create the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which was signed in 1968 and brought into being in 1970. Currently boasting 189 parties, the NPT is the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. In 1995 it was extended indefinitely.

When India detonated a nuclear device in 1974, abusing foreign-supplied civilian technology, the US and other key industrialized nations established the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and developed a set of guidelines restricting the export of items and technology specially designed for nuclear use. Over the years, those guidelines have been progressively improved upon, including by the adoption of the "non-proliferation principle", whereby suppliers are to authorize a nuclear transfer only when satisfied that it would not contribute to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. After Iraq was found to have evaded IAEA safeguards by secretly developing weapons