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Nonproliferation across the generations

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My father, Lawrence Scheinman, passed away this year. He'll be hugely missed on a personal level, but his death also has me contemplating a more global topic—the place of the United States in the world nuclear order. Let me explain.

My father was a specialist on nuclear nonproliferation—the sensible idea that nations without nuclear weapons should not acquire them, not least because these weapons may one day be used again. Because nuclear weapons are unlike any other weapon devised in human history, blocking their spread to any state, whether friend or foe, came to be viewed as vital to US national interests and to the larger project to stabilize the international system after World War II.

Nonproliferation is a familiar concept today, but this was not always so. The discipline was a novelty around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, worked on by a small coterie of academics and government experts. Long before North Korea's Kim Jong-un appeared on the scene rattling his nuclear saber, these folks were busy assessing the military risks that new entrants into the nuclear weapons club would pose and designing policies to prevent that outcome.

By the late 1960s, a light came on for the world's two superpowers as they realized that a wave of new proliferation could entangle them in unwanted nuclear war. It may surprise some to learn, given present difficulties in US-Russia relations, that the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the most significant anti-proliferation agreement ever reached—was the product of US and Soviet cooperation. The treaty and the rules built up around it wouldn't exist absent that partnership.

The NPT changed the game, moving nonproliferation into the mainstream of US national security concerns. It transcended party politics at home—this was a Johnson treaty that Nixon moved to the Senate for ratification in one of his first acts as president. Successive administrations used it to catalyze global action and encourage others to adopt US policies as their own. Nonproliferation scholarship also ramped up, building on the work of experts such as my father, who wrote a [first-of-its-kind book](http://bit.ly/2vjALOR) (<http://bit.ly/2vjALOR>) tracing the French decision to go nuclear. Similar nuclear histories by many other authors were to follow.

Over its nearly 50-year history, the NPT has made the world safer. Consider that nations such as South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Ukraine and others at one time or another pursued but turned away from nuclear weapons. The door was slammed shut on Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian efforts to acquire the Bomb. A.Q. Khan's nuclear black market was put out of business. And thankfully, it is now 70-plus years since the last use of a nuclear weapon in war.

Yet the treaty's record is far from perfect. From the nuclear build-up under way in South and Northeast Asia to Iran's uncertain nuclear ambitions, cause for concern clearly remains. Of particular urgency, North Korea is racing ahead with nuclear and missile programs that so obviously threaten the security of the United States and its allies.

Some wonder whether the NPT is now a largely spent force. That wouldn't have been my father's judgment, knowing his confidence in the treaty—and in nations to uphold a rules-based system. Later in life, he was gratified to see the world join in forcing Iran to the negotiating table. I'm sure he would have applauded efforts to treat the North Korean challenge as a high priority, while he'd have waved off fanciful ideas such as the newly negotiated international treaty banning all nuclear weapons. That treaty might come into force, but without the participation of any state that actually has nuclear weapons. So what's the point?

It is true that the NPT created an obligation for nuclear weapon states to pursue nuclear disarmament, but it set no timetable or road map for disarmament to be achieved. Given how far the world remains from the disarmament end-line, energy would be better spent dealing with today's challenges—Iran, North Korea, nuclear terrorism, and the stalemate on nuclear arms control brought about by Putin's Russia.

History suggests that the atomic bomb will continue to tempt rogue states seeking security on the cheap, as well as terrorists with their twisted, apocalyptic aims. Even close US allies such as Japan and Germany may one day revisit their decisions to forego nuclear weapons if their security ultimately seems to require it. Taboos can be broken, as we've seen with Syria's shameful use of chemical weapons.

Because the threat of nuclear proliferation can never totally expire—after all, nuclear science cannot be unlearned—US leadership in this business must never go

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wanting. The fact is that no other nation has the interest, resources, or influence to take Washington's place. Leadership in nonproliferation is a role that for decades the United States embraced because it's so completely in the US national interest. Nuclear weapons in the hands of additional adversaries, or even allies, would endanger populations in the United States and everywhere else, and ultimately upend an international order that has delivered many decades of relative peace and prosperity.

Leadership on multilateral issues can be a thankless, frustrating business, and nonproliferation is no exception. It's a tough undertaking. As I know from my own experience, negotiations are time-consuming and difficult, and reaching agreement requires compromises. Why bother with all this? Because a United States in retreat on nonproliferation, or openly dismissive of the NPT's promise to one day create a world at peace and without nuclear weapons, would only deprive Washington of the moral and political standing to challenge violators such as North Korea—the very function for which credible leadership is most important.

The good news is that the nonproliferation regime still enjoys incredibly broad political support from governments and civil society. That support is rooted in years of US initiatives, policies, and persistence. It's also a living legacy of my father's generation—one that I hope future generations take seriously and commit to improve upon. That first generation of experts would be pleased knowing that those who followed them tried.