

If You Build it, They Might Come

By

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Beneficiaries of American extended deterrence seek reassurance through visible and tangible efforts. This default to only thinking about American action disregards important options to improve nuclear deterrence. There is a low cost self-help option for allies and partners that does not require new or more nuclear weapons. Every state under the United States' nuclear umbrella can build hardened military facilities for the purpose of hosting American nuclear weapons.

Some commentators believe the [submarine launched nuclear cruise missile](#) (SLCM-N) is a better [approach](#). Others believe the [existing low-yield](#) submarine launched ballistic missile (W76-2) and the new air launched cruise missile are all that is [needed](#) to assure allies well into the future.

One issue with the W76-2 is the fact that an adversary cannot tell the difference between a low- or high-yield weapon until after it detonates. The low-yield cruise missile element avoids that problem but only offers a unilateral American solution to potential NATO [inability](#) to quickly responding with observably non-strategic nuclear weapons.

The former [Polish prime minister's](#) recent comments about his desire to host nuclear weapons in Poland, was based on his concern that conventional forces may fail to convince Russia that Poland has the will or capability to retaliate to Russian aggression. When then-prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, said he wants to "[act quickly](#)" to begin hosting US nuclear weapons, it was this concern that drove his thinking, which leads back to the opening proposition; build the needed facilities.

Alternatively, the Biden administration made a non-weapon based assurance move with South Korea by involving them more in [nuclear planning](#). The development of military facilities for nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles is, however, a way for allies to draw attention to their willingness to respond to existential or nuclear attack, which can be done almost entirely on their own.

If Poland, South Korea, or other US nuclear umbrella beneficiaries are serious about sending a stronger message to their adversaries (and the United States) they can demonstrate resolve through the suggested defense spending. Constructing weapons storage and security system ([WS3](#)) sites with the same, or greater, security and survivability as those built across Central Europe in the 1980s eliminates at least one [argument against](#) direct participation in nuclear sharing.

Specific design criteria necessary to calculate just how survivable WS3 sites are or how much the cost to build is of course classified. A feel for cost from publicly available congressional [testimony](#) is possible. Government accountability office [products](#) and a blue ribbon panel [report](#). Congressional testimony puts nuclear weapon storage improvements at about \$50 million per base, each with several individual nuclear storage units. This is in line with the cost of building new [F-35 hardened shelters](#). At least a [thousand hardened shelters](#) already exist [across Europe](#) and [the Pacific](#), so the actual cost for adding just the WS3 element might actually be lower.

The presence of American nuclear weapons on NATO territory is what sets it apart from other bilateral extended deterrence promises. Although German officials publicly talk about [removing nuclear weapons](#) from their territory to reduce the chances of becoming a nuclear target, the idea is always rejected. However, just voicing this opinion begs the questions, would Germany allow allies to sortie nuclear weapons from their airbases and, more importantly, is that friction exploitable? The Morawiecki seemed to think so. The most credible threat of nuclear retaliation is of course for the Poles to have their own nuke, but that is neither plausible nor desirable for all involved.

The next most credible threat would be Polish pilots flying Polish F-35s out of Polish airfields to deliver NATO assigned weapons requiring the United States do nothing but provide the codes. The same logic would apply in Asia, improving deterrence for South Korea, Japan, or even Singapore. Because the F-35 was born nuclear capable, each country with a squadron of them and WS3 sites is just one US policy decision and a nuclear code box away from being able to deliver a nuclear strike.

Training all NATO F-35 pilots to [deliver nuclear weapons](#) was recently [recommended](#) as a low-cost means of improving deterrence. Even if NATO stores no greater number of weapons nor are any re-introduced to the Pacific, the simple fact that capability improved sends a “[clear and visible signal](#)” of partner resolve. Partners who build WS3 sites and already have F-35s take virtually all the cost, time, and training issues out of hosting American nuclear weapons.

Building a WS3 site is not only about sharing the financial burden, but it also shows backbone by making one’s airfields an even more important target for the adversary trying to take even [one inch](#) of territory. Bringing (almost) all the necessary elements of a nuclear retaliatory capability within one’s border virtually eliminates the age-old worry of whether the US is willing to [trade New York for Paris](#). It is true that extended deterrence partners may have to do without one or even two F-35s to afford the several WS3 sites necessary to preclude their easy targeting. But spending that money and accepting the risk shows that America’s partners see credible nuclear retaliation as valuable.

Even without weapons in hand, simply having nuclear certified storage capacity turns F-35 partner nations into nascent nuclear self-defense capable states. This approach costs the US nothing, discourages nuclear technology proliferation, and does not necessitate expanding American stockpiles.

Partner nations building WS3 sites go a long way toward showing their belief in the value of nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing. Increasing the number of targets an aggressor must destroy to deny nuclear retaliation decreases the likelihood of the aggressor going nuclear in the first place.

Perhaps fielding a slew of secure and hardened nuclear weapons storage sites is a deterrence dream, but if they build them, perhaps the weapons will come. At worst this investment creates a classical deterrence threat by leaving something to chance with the future “upload” possibility for a more amenable American presidential administration.