

THE SOUTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ARMAMENT DEBATE



Promoting Dialogue and Understanding
Between Korea and the United States

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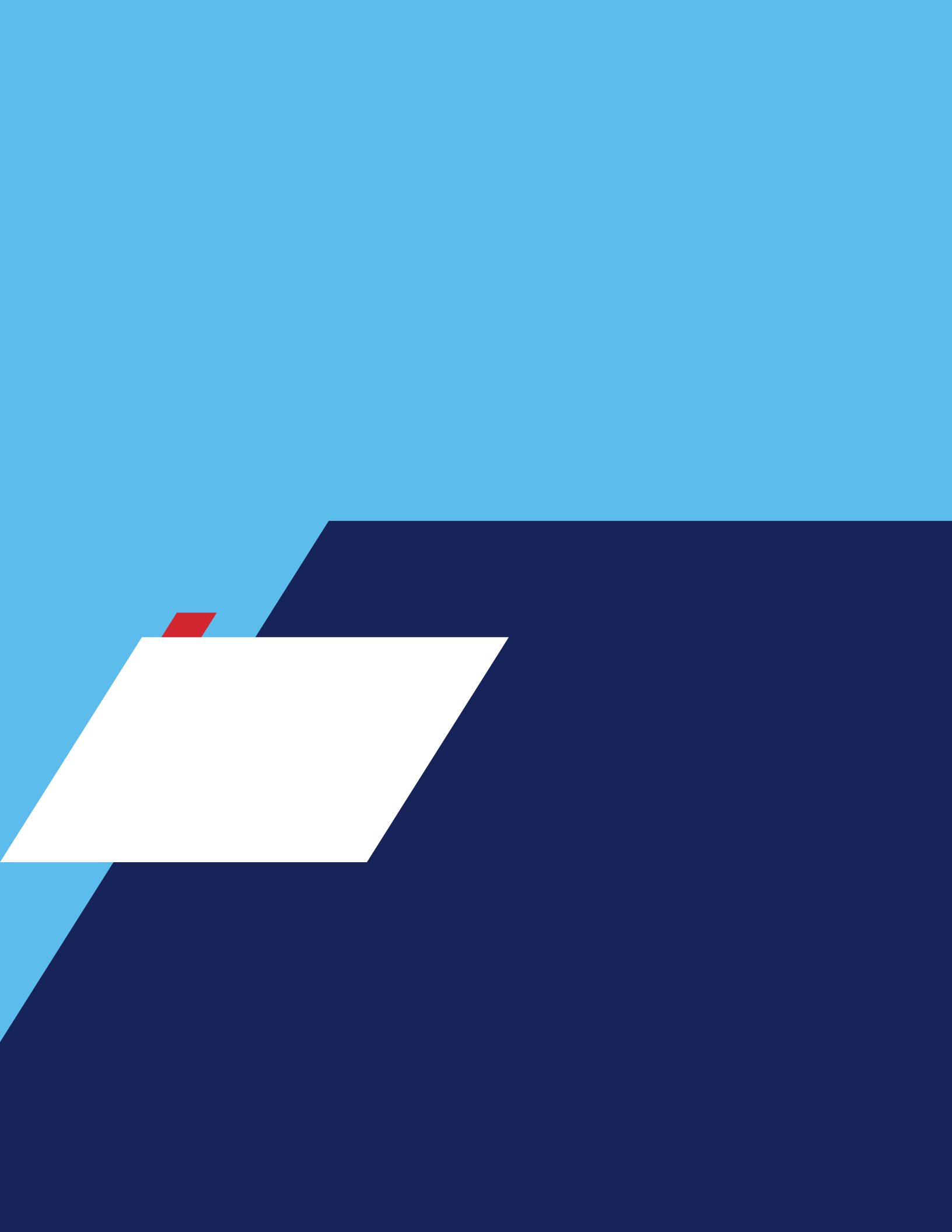


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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

KEI'S SPECIAL PROJECT ON THE SOUTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ARMAMENT DEBATE

South Korea's nuclear armament debate received renewed attention in 2023. But, this issue is one that has animated Korean politics, both domestic and international, for the past five decades. To explore this multifaceted issue, KEI brought together 12 emerging and mid-career experts to cover the South Korean nuclear weapons debate from three angles—the historical background, the domestic discourse, and the international implications. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone.



SECTION I: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History's Long Shadow: Contradictions in the U.S. Commitment to Korea

Clint Work

The intersection of the Korean peninsula and nuclear weapons goes back to [the dawn of the nuclear age](#). Moreover, well before Pyongyang possessed nuclear weapons and the delivery systems to threaten Washington and Seoul, or the latter contemplated its own nuclear armament, the United States considered and threatened nuclear use on the peninsula.

The history surrounding the U.S. commitment to and presence in South Korea, including U.S. deployment of and threats to use nuclear weapons, is critical to understanding where the U.S.-ROK alliance finds itself today.

This history is characterized by a massive U.S. commitment to South Korea beset by inherent contradictions and profoundly complicated processes of extended deterrence and allied reassurance, made more so by inconsistent U.S. signals and South Korea's intensely divided domestic politics in the post-Cold War era.

TENSIONS WITHIN A MAXIMUM COMMITMENT

Soon after U.S. forces arrived on the Korean peninsula in 1945, Washington looked to withdraw. Korea was considered a [strategic liability](#) not worth the further expenditure of resources—U.S. forces left in 1949. Yet Korea's [linkage with](#) the broader strategic tapestry of the early Cold War and the direct American role in the creation of South Korea made it [symbolic of U.S. credibility](#) writ large. When North Korea invaded, U.S. forces returned, saving South Korea from certain destruction. Throughout the Korean War and during an otherwise devastating conventional [air campaign](#), the U.S. considered tactical battlefield use of atomic weapons and [repeatedly simulated](#) atomic bombing runs.

Dwight Eisenhower campaigned, in part, on a [promise to end the war](#). Once in office, he hinted at the use of atomic weapons if armistice negotiations remained deadlocked. Although Soviet archives cast doubt on the claim, [Eisenhower](#) and other high-level officials said the threat helped end

hostilities. However, such threats belied an inherent tension in Washington's view of Korea: it was not important enough to further expand the war on or beyond the peninsula but too important to relinquish. This tension remains today.

To achieve a position of strength, deter future aggression, and demonstrate a maximum U.S. commitment, Washington agreed to a [Mutual Defense Treaty](#) (MDT) with and forward-deployment of U.S. forces in South Korea, and soon [after began considering](#) deploying tactical nuclear weapons. Knowing the move would violate the [armistice](#), which restricted the number and types of weapons existing when the agreement was signed, yet also concerned about communist violations of the same, Washington announced it considered itself relieved of all corresponding obligations until such time as the military balance was restored. It first deployed U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in January 1958, and [by the mid-to-late-1960s](#) had deployed eight different types and nearly 1,000 warheads. Although not officially acknowledged, such deployments were an open secret.

The decision was driven by [several factors](#). The Pentagon stated its "[number one reason](#)" was to prevent U.S. and ROK troops from being overrun. Deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and advanced conventional capabilities also aimed to "modernize" U.S. and ROK forces and pressure President Rhee Syngman to reduce a bloated ROK defense establishment almost entirely underwritten by U.S. assistance. Modernization was a means to hem in Rhee's demands and [set the parameters](#) of Seoul's military capabilities and agency. U.S. officials feared by introducing atomic-capable weapons, Rhee would demand the same for the ROK. They tried to balance between showing fidelity to South Korea's security and enhancing its capabilities without incentivizing it to seek or independently develop such capabilities in a manner incompatible with U.S. interests. This [dynamic](#) preceded the Korean War and arrival of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and continued thereafter.

More importantly, the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Korea was driven by a global strategy to incorporate nuclear weapons in U.S. military forces. [Eisenhower's New Look national security policy](#) aimed to balance between maintaining the vitality of the U.S. economy, yet building sufficient strength to prosecute the Cold War. Alongside the doctrine of [massive retaliation](#), utilizing nuclear weapons to deter aggression or fight a war was seen as the way to economize yet preserve strength. Four years after forward deployment in Europe, the concurrent deployment of theater nuclear weapons in Taiwan, Korea, and elsewhere in East Asia was [part of](#) this larger whole. Propelled by the exponential increase in nuclear stockpiles and growing importance of nuclear-capable weapons as the basis for U.S. military strength, the Korean deployment was tied to this broader techno-bureaucratic momentum.

The problem, however, was it applied a catch-all formula, which – alongside a monolithic conception of Communism – conflated distinct local threats in ways that veiled problematic contradictions beneath the surface.

LIMITED & POLARIZED OPTIONS

Forward deployment of large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons implied deterrence failure on a [grand scale](#). Of course, signaling acceptance of such an enormous cost was itself meant to reinforce deterrence. Yet massive retaliation lacked credibility and nuance in the Korean context. It starkly limited options. The U.S. strategy of [flexible response](#) in the 1960s grew out of these critiques and grappled with the need to develop a more refined spectrum of options across strategic, tactical, and conventional levels, but it hardly solved the nuclear dilemma in Korea. In fact, it merely clarified the contradictions.

These were evident when U.S. officials [considered](#) reducing or making more flexible U.S. troop deployments. To do so would put greater attention on “the already heavy nuclear emphasis” of the U.S. posture, required prior commitment to a nuclear strategy, and earlier use of nuclear weapons in a conflict. Similar concerns, [among others](#), later motivated opposition to President Jimmy Carter’s attempt to remove U.S. ground forces from South Korea in the late 1970s. Limited options and contradictions also were apparent amidst North Korean provocations during the [“Second” Korean War](#). Following the 1968 Pueblo incident and 1969 EC-121 shootdown, Presidents [Johnson](#) and [Nixon](#), respectively, considered but decided against the nuclear option.

Their deliberations revealed a [polarized spectrum](#) of U.S. options: between a minimum conventional response and maximum threat of nuclear use. To a degree, both lacked credibility. The former risked further provocations and angered Seoul, which expected a more robust response, thus potentially spurring its own effort to build greater strategic autonomy from Washington. The latter was so disproportionate it was unbelievable, politically costly, of dubious military utility, and, critically, went against the ROK’s own desire to avoid nuclear use in Korea. Moreover, in both cases, U.S. officials were dubious they had the requisite forces on the peninsula to go beyond a limited conventional response.

These events spurred significant ROK doubts about the U.S. commitment and further U.S. efforts to reduce and increase the flexibility of its forces in Korea. The latter, in turn, further increased ROK efforts to hedge against an uncertain U.S. commitment by initiating its own military modernization and [clandestine nuclear weapons program](#) in the 1970s. Among other strong countermeasures, Washington curbed the ROK nuclear program by promising to maintain troop levels and through Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger’s June 1975 [public acknowledgement](#) of the existence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Korea, the first ever by a U.S. official, and [refusal to rule out first use](#) on the peninsula. Ironically, the more Washington reduced and realigned its force posture, the more it found itself having to cast its nuclear shadow. This dynamic became even more pronounced amidst Carter’s abortive troop withdrawal policy.

In 1978, the Pentagon went from being mum regarding tactical nukes, to [publicly asserting](#) their [“symbolic importance”](#) as “visible evidence of the broader U.S. commitment and of the linkage between our deployed posture and the strategic nuclear forces.” Starting in [1979](#), Washington began to insert the “nuclear umbrella” into the text of the SCM’s Joint Communique; a practice maintained ever since. And, lest rhetoric be insufficient, U.S. nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) suddenly began making dozens of port visits to South Korea from 1976 to 1981. Simultaneously, the alliance [established](#) the bilateral U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC), which took over South Korea’s defense from the mostly unilateral, U.S.-led United Nations Command (UNC) and provided Seoul an increased operational and command and control role commensurate with its rapidly advancing capabilities.

The CFC created a far more integrated defense relationship, yet one within which the U.S. remained the first-among-not-so-equal partners. While temporarily settling nerves, none of these notable changes obviated the tension at the core of the U.S. commitment nor the polarized and limited options it had vis-à-vis a highly risk-acceptant North Korea. Furthermore, tighter alliance integration explicitly excluded consultation on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Yet during this same period of heightened concern by South Korea, deployments of tactical nuclear weapons were significantly reduced. A major [security review](#) of regional deployments found the security for such deployments unsatisfactory, diplomatic arrangements with allies inadequate, and the number of weapons deployed far in excess of war-planning requirements. [Forward deployed tactical weapons](#) systems were in range of North Korean artillery, opening them up for preemptive attack and increasing the need for early use in a conflict. Moreover, use of such weapons posed direct risks to alliance forces and, as South Korea urbanized, to the Korean people themselves and for neighboring countries depending on wind conditions. As a result of such scrutiny, the number of nuclear weapons in South Korea [was reduced](#) from roughly 540 in 1976 to approximately 150 nuclear artillery shells and bombs by 1985.

The truth, though, was the manifold escalatory risks posed by these weapons were there all along; and they are often cited today by opponents of their reintroduction. What changed in the mid- to late-1980s was the political and strategic context. The waning of the Cold War allowed for a shift, culminating in President George H.W. Bush's Nuclear Security Initiative in September 1991, towards the [unilateral removal](#) of all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from abroad, [except](#) for air bombs from a handful of NATO allies. Similar to the introduction of nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, [their removal](#) largely was driven by geopolitical imperatives but also to help persuade Pyongyang to accept international inspections of its nuclear program – and because tactical nuclear weapons were no longer seen as necessary for South Korea's defense. Nevertheless, a key condition to reassure Seoul and uphold extended deterrence was continued U.S. [reaffirmation](#) of the nuclear umbrella.

POST-COLD WAR DETERRENCE & REASSURANCE

Deterring North Korea once it advanced its nuclear and missile programs has been a far more complex challenge. U.S. nuclear posturing and signals [have been inconsistent](#) and, at times, [highly provocative](#). Insofar as deterring full-scale attack against Seoul is the purpose of U.S. extended deterrence, these signals have succeeded. Yet they have [threatened](#) Pyongyang, and, along with other factors, helped motivate its drive to build up its own deterrent capabilities. While U.S. threats have been partially effective at the upper, strategic level, they lack credibility below that threshold. During the Cold War, North Korea was perfectly willing to test the alliance in that space. Now, armed with its own nuclear deterrent, Pyongyang is more [emboldened](#).

Critically, deterrence signals are also meant to reassure Seoul. Yet Seoul's economic growth and enhanced capabilities – while the basis for a transformed, stronger alliance – have significantly complicated allied reassurance. Given Seoul's improved capabilities and further reductions and realignments in U.S. forces, official alliance policy was for the U.S. [to move to a supporting role](#) and the ROK to take the lead in the combined defense. However, the process has been fitful, largely due to the stickiness of longstanding institutional arrangements and underpinning psychologies. For Washington, there is less emphasis on policing ROK capability advancements per se than making sure they fit into the alliance's policy, deterrence strategy, and operational planning insofar as ROK capabilities have become more central to the alliance's deterrence and warfighting equation. Yet, as a result, Seoul places even [greater scrutiny](#) on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

South Korea's democratization, too, while deepening alliance ties, has complicated the reassurance process. During the Cold War, alliance management was conducted with successive anti-communist ROK dictators; reassurance and decision-making were more centralized and controlled. Following democratization, public opinion and civil society [became more prominent factors](#) in alliance relations and [ROK leaders](#) with different views on the alliance and inter-Korean relations have entered the decision-making fray.

Progressive ROK administrations openly distinguish ROK sovereignty from the alliance and pursue a theory of deterrence premised on restraint. While [hardly](#) premised on disarmament, it is based upon a more [compatriotic](#) view of inter-Korean relations and seeks greater autonomy within and outside the alliance. Conservative administrations seek tighter alliance relations and operate with a theory of deterrence emphasizing preparedness to swiftly and even disproportionately retaliate against North Korean provocations or aggression. For them, relations with North Korea, while not without a compatriotic element, are framed more around the battle over inter-Korean legitimacy; the sameness of the people intensifies the conflict. Reassurance gets tangled as different administrations react differently to U.S. extended deterrence policy—which is itself inconsistent—and adopt [ever-shifting](#) policy trajectories.

For progressive administrations, U.S. extended deterrence measures are often seen as too much, increasing rather than lowering tensions and undermining trust building with North Korea. This results in efforts to [restrain Washington](#) and remove the “nuclear umbrella” from alliance documents and [joint statements](#) as well as disputes surrounding Seoul’s push to take a larger role in the alliance’s [operational plans](#) and [command architecture](#). U.S. officials often view this process as overly politicized, which undermines trust and results in U.S. restraints, real and perceived, on ROK autonomy. Conservative administrations, for their part, frequently see U.S. deterrence measures as not enough. Like progressives, they seek greater input in and awareness about alliance and U.S. planning, but for different reasons. Rather than necessarily seeking a leading or autonomous role in the alliance, they want to [assume a more robust ROK defense and retaliatory posture](#) vis-à-vis North Korean provocations but also want to know the United States [stands alongside](#) them. Therefore, they also bristle at U.S. [constraints](#).

These complex dynamics have played out in [alliance consultative mechanisms](#) over the last two decades; mechanisms which only began to actively consider alliance policy and planning around extended deterrence starting in 2010. These mechanisms represent a genuine effort to develop a more holistic approach to deter an evolving North Korean threat; to proactively fill the gap between the longstanding polarized spectrum of options; and signal to Pyongyang it cannot use its own nuclear shadow to coerce or freely operate in that gap. However, due to the aforementioned dynamics, the allies have brought [different understandings](#) to these consultative mechanisms. There appears policy consensus but beneath the surface there are perceptual and operational gaps.

CONCLUSION

If polarized deterrence options and having the requisite force posture in place on the peninsula was a problem for the U.S. and the alliance during the Cold War, it is even more so today. Pyongyang has the capability to turn the entire peninsula into an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) environment while threatening the continental United States. Moreover, in a context of great power competition, U.S. attention and resources are being pulled elsewhere, currently to Europe and potentially to Taiwan. Both factors severely restrict what assets the U.S. can bring to bear in Korea and how quickly it might do so and place greater stress on the ROK, which already bears the overwhelming conventional deterrence and defense burden.

Tightening alliance cooperation along the conventional-nuclear threshold is critical to enhancing reassurance and reducing the appeal for Seoul of its own nuclear deterrent but also signaling to Pyongyang its advancing capabilities do not afford it the luxury to coerce beneath or up to the nuclear-level. Recognizing this, both the Biden and Yoon administrations have redoubled efforts to tighten cooperation where U.S. capabilities end, ROK capabilities begin, and, most importantly, where they intertwine. To be effective, this demands Washington show greater fidelity to Seoul’s need for more information and involvement in U.S. nuclear policy and planning, beyond what historically it has been comfortable with, and for Seoul to understand the limits of such cooperation do not reflect a lack of U.S. commitment.

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South Korea's Drive Toward Deterrent Capabilities

Andy Hong

President Yoon Suk Yeol caused an immediate reaction in Washington, DC when he mentioned the possibility of an independent nuclear deterrent for South Korea. However, South Korea's potential development of nuclear weapons is nothing new. Over half a century ago, Seoul initiated a project to develop nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable delivery systems. Although its effort to develop nuclear weapons was curtailed, South Korea has successfully developed and gradually advanced potential dual-capable delivery systems. Retracing these steps sheds light on the current debate.

THE WARHEAD

South Korea's first pursuit of an independent nuclear deterrent came at a time of great geostrategic uncertainty in the early 1970s. The United States was disengaging from Vietnam and Southeast Asia more broadly and, under the Nixon Doctrine, passing a greater defense burden to its allies. Meanwhile, the Sino-Soviet split and U.S.-Sino détente introduced new complex variables in Northeast Asian geopolitics. Seoul, which had committed the largest foreign troop contingent to Vietnam while confronting a major conventional threat from North Korea, now faced the [withdrawal](#) of one of the two remaining U.S. divisions from Korea.

Amidst uncertainty regarding the U.S. commitment, Park Chung-hee directed the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) in November 1971 to develop a nuclear deterrent as to counter Pyongyang's superior conventional forces. The [Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute \(KAERI\)](#) assisted ADD in the [acquisition and development](#) of nuclear reprocessing and fuel fabrication infrastructure from abroad.

Importantly, South Korea had already begun nuclear research in 1956. In the process, Seoul had enthusiastically joined various nuclear treaty regimes to signal its peaceful intent and secure U.S. support—joining the IAEA in 1957, ratifying the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1964, and signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. However, by 1971, ROK research had expanded to other international partners,

initially due to [failed deals](#) with the United States, to evade scrutiny from Washington. In May 1972, ROK nuclear technocrats secured an agreement with France to acquire nuclear reprocessing and fuel fabrication technology, critical for enriching nuclear materials to weapons grade.

By 1973, a special project team within KAERI was fully engaged in the mission to acquire an independent nuclear deterrent, using a budget of \$1.5 to \$2 billion for the development of a 20-kiloton plutonium device. KAERI ran a tight and secret network of actors from the Blue House and various ministries, while [avoiding](#) interaction with the Ministry of National Defense given its deep integration with the U.S. military. Two further breakthroughs advanced the project: interim contracts with French firms for fuel fabrication and spent-fuel reprocessing technology; and an agreement with Canada for a CANDU heavy water reactor. These were critical steps toward plutonium extraction for a 20-kiloton bomb. Ironically, Seoul finally ratified the NPT in 1975—7 years after signing it—as a [precondition](#) to acquire the CANDU reactor with proliferating intent.

Driven partly by India's nuclear test in 1974, U.S. officials were increasingly attuned to the possibility of nuclear proliferation in the developing world. In the case of Seoul, Washington's concerns were piqued by a [December 1974 telegram](#) sent from the U.S. Embassy, Seoul. Subsequent U.S. pressure resulted in the [cancellation](#) of the French and Canadian contracts, putting an end to Seoul's ambitions.

However, in 1977 with President Carter's efforts to withdraw all U.S. ground forces from Korea, tensions flared again when KAERI's fuel reprocessing efforts moved to the Korea Nuclear Fuel Development Institute (KNFDI) to quietly continue the project. But, increased U.S. scrutiny, strengthened IAEA safeguards, and Seoul's 1975 ratification of the NPT once again foiled South Korea's progress. By the time of Park's demise in 1979, his enormously risky, decade-long gambit seemed to have also ended—after jeopardizing South Korea's growing civilian nuclear sector, its alliance with the United States, and the security environment of Northeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the issue was once again thrust into the public light when in 2004, Seoul admitted to the IAEA that South Korean scientists had four years prior enriched a small amount of uranium to near-weapons grade. The revelation was quickly followed by a public probe, as well as [skepticism](#) that then-president Kim Dae-jung was directly involved in the secret project. Although the 2004 incident was short-lived compared to the events in the 1970s, several key takeaways remain: South Korea had the capacity to develop enrichment technologies, (although the scale of such capacity remained unclear); any movement toward proliferation was perceived as immensely destabilizing by the United States and the international community, especially following Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT; and the international response and condemnation would be unequivocal and swift.

Twenty years later, no such project has materialized yet public discussion on South Korea's potential nuclear armament has reemerged. South Korea has one of the world's most advanced civilian nuclear programs and is a major exporter of such technologies. Seoul today is critically linked to—and is one of the greatest beneficiaries of—the principle of the peaceful atom, cooperating with the IAEA and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to contribute to global prosperity. South Korea is both deeply embedded in and a major stakeholder of civil nuclear power—highly dependent on the NSG for fissile material, and a beneficiary of [lucrative](#) nuclear exports. Beyond the technical [difficulty](#) in developing a nuclear weapons program, the consequent cutoff from NSG and [U.S. action](#) against ROK exports of nuclear technology would deal unavoidable and severe damage to South Korea's nuclear industry and [prestigious reputation](#) in the sector.

THE TRIAD

South Korea's conventional weapons advancements are also a critical variable in Seoul's potential development of an indigenous nuclear deterrent. While not necessarily designed with nuclear capabilities in mind, the ROK military is well on its way to developing latency for an independent nuclear triad: free-fall and air-launched ordnance, land-based ballistic missiles, and submarine-launched missiles.

Starting in the 1970s, the free fall and air-launched delivery component was perhaps the most readily available. South Korea initially received then-state of the art F-4D aircraft as a [concession](#) for Seoul's involvement in the Vietnam conflict, and later purchased the upgraded F-4E for the modernization of the rapidly aging Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF). The acquisition of such U.S. designs alongside the attempted development of a nuclear device, provided for potential aerial deployment of nuclear weapons.

The ROKAF has since added many more advanced U.S. airframes to eventually replace the [aging](#) F-4s and augment the [growing indigenous fleet](#)—from the F-16C/D (first delivered 1986), to the F-15K (2005), and the F-35A (2019); all nuclear-capable designs.

Beyond possession of an airframe, the air-deployed ordnance with which to deploy any nuclear warhead still poses a challenge for ROKAF. Rather than depend on American airframes, South Korea may enhance its latency on the air-dropped component with its [concurrent development](#) of the KAI KF-21 *Boramae* and DAPA's Korea Long-Ranged Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM). Domestically procuring both platforms preempts the burdensome regulatory requirements that come with imported weapons. Based on a [Swedish-German design](#), the ALCM (for which the venerable *Phantom* serves as a test bed) is unlikely to itself mount a nuclear warhead; nevertheless, the experience could give South Korea the knowhow and industrial infrastructure to build similar air-launched weapons that could be nuclear-capable.

The land- and submarine-launched ballistic missile arms of the South Korean military form a storied yet more recent development. Like the nuclear warhead it would later be envisioned to carry, South Korea's ballistic missile program also came from a [clandestine](#) ADD project under direction of the Blue House in 1971. The project began with an agreement with McDonnell Douglas to jointly research modifications to the *Nike Hercules* surface-to-air missile, with limits on range and payload to 180 kilometers and 500 kilograms, respectively. Despite [resistance](#) from the U.S. Department of State, the project accelerated in 1975 under the *Yulgok* Plan to close the capability gap with Pyongyang. In 1978, Seoul successfully demonstrated the *Baekgom* surface-to-surface ballistic missile. In 1979, with sustained U.S. pressure on the now well-known nuclear program, the Park regime codified the initial range and payload limitations of 180 kilometers and 500 kilograms. Following Park's assassination in the same year, his successor Chun Do-hwan continued to observe the limitation with the *Hyunmoo* missiles. It is of note that nevertheless by [1990](#), U.S. inspections found that *Hyunmoo* retained the potential to extend its range to 250 kilometers—demonstrating Seoul's willingness to stretch the boundaries of its potential lethality.

As U.S. resistance held against Seoul's calls for renegotiating the missile guidelines, Seoul turned to the newly formed Russian Federation through the *Bulgom* (Siberian Bear) Operation. The technology exchange of platforms and knowhow with Russia not only accelerated development of South Korea's military missile capabilities, but also formed the foundation of [South Korea's space program](#). In 1997,

Seoul eventually succeeded in setting new ballistic missile guidelines to 300-kilometer range and 500-kilogram payloads, and joined the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—despite initial U.S. opposition and the imposition of several [conditions](#) calling for transparency from Seoul. With subsequently growing North Korean nuclear and rocket technology, the guidelines were again renegotiated in 2012 to a range that covers 800 kilometers. Demonstrating South Korea's latent capabilities, it only took two years for Seoul to develop a ballistic missile with a range of 500 kilometers. Two more revisions have taken place: in 2017, all restrictions on payload weight were lifted, and in 2020, Seoul received the green light to develop solid-propellant rockets—a landmark development, as liquid-fuel rockets require laborious and time-consuming fueling directly prior to launch, whereas solid-fuel rockets are shelf-stable and can be launched more quickly.

By the May 2021 U.S.-ROK summit, all remaining restrictions were effectively removed. Development had already been proceeding at a breakneck pace. In March 2020, DAPA announced that the [Hyunmoo-4](#) could successfully deliver a 2,000 kilogram payload over 800 kilometers. In September 2021, South Korea became the [first nation without nuclear weapons to have SLBM capabilities](#), also breaking the 1979 restrictions by over 200 kilometers. Most recently in December 2022, Seoul [belatedly](#) announced the successful test of a solid-propellant space launch vehicle just six months after the second-ever successful launch of the older, liquid-fuel *Nuri*.

Nevertheless, South Korea faces resistance on its long-range strike capabilities. In the 30 years since the ROK Navy (ROKN) commissioned the [first](#) submarine in South Korean history, South Korea has taken great efforts towards rapidly advancing its submarine-based strike capabilities. However, its capabilities still fall short of nuclear propulsion that can allow submarines to move faster and remain submerged for longer. A ballistic missile submarine's ability to remain undetected and constantly moving provides an immense deterrent capability; a capability provided by nuclear propulsion. South Korea has been pushing for a Korean nuclear submarine (KSSN) publicly for nearly [twenty years](#). The U.S. agreement to transfer nuclear submarine technology to Australia with AUKUS only galvanized the debate.

Whether assistance from the United States or [France](#), or independent South Korean development of [miniature reactors](#) opens the doors to KSSN is still uncertain. However, AUKUS and renewed calls for Seoul to proceed with KSSN is indeed reminiscent of the broader South Korean ballistic missile story. It is a story of constantly shifting boundaries:

from initial restriction and resistance to conditional allowance, and to eventual unrestricted development. As a result, Seoul may foresee a future in which the restrictions on nuclear devices proceed in much the same way as they were lifted for its missile capabilities. While it may seem that tectonic shifts are underway in Indo-Pacific security, for Seoul to arrive at such a conclusion remains misguided and reductionist: a nuclear device involves a host of far more complex variables such as [technical dependency](#) on the nuclear supplier group, formal international legal ramifications with regards to the [NPT](#), and customary international obligations to nonproliferation.

THE DOCTRINE (OR LACK THEREOF)

Nuclear weapons, like many instruments of war and peace, cannot fully achieve their stated goals in the absence of a thoroughly developed doctrinal infrastructure and rigorously trained plan of employment. There has been very little discussion on the actual doctrine of nuclear use in South Korea, nor is there an infrastructure in place to help direct and sustain a nuclear force.

In the 1970s, it was simply conceived that an indigenous nuclear weapon would be deployed either on U.S.-built combat aircraft or on the *Baekgom* missile—even though the procurement and upkeep of both assets depended on U.S. [approval](#). The institutional structure of the South Korean military even today preempts the development of such plans, as the ROK military falls under the wartime operational control of Combined Forces Command. As long as the United States remains committed to nonproliferation, even conducting joint nuclear exercises with U.S. assets remains [tenuous](#) at best.

Some indicators suggest Seoul is seeking to amend this institutional impasse. President Yoon's goals to establish a South Korean [Strategic Forces Command](#) by 2024 could potentially be a step in this direction, as the aforementioned triad would fall under the SFC. The SFC also would play a key role in the Kill Chain strategy and Korea Massive Punishment Retaliation plan, which for the comprise Seoul's conventional deterrent against Pyongyang.

However, a preemptive or retaliatory strategy does not alone cover the myriad implications of developing nuclear deterrent capabilities. The ROK military has done exercises for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) environments, often [in conjunction](#) with U.S. forces. Conventional equipment has also been [upgraded](#) to withstand CBRNE environments. However, at the height of the last bout of escalation in 2017, it was [found](#) that South Korean civilian shelters and bunkers were in a woeful state.

The civilian infrastructure required for nuclear deterrence is severely [lacking](#), with many shelters in disrepair, even fewer being suitable for nuclear war, and extremely low public readiness. To discuss the development and deployment of nuclear weapons without concurrently discussing how to prepare the civilian population—or [whether preparation is possible at all](#)—for nuclear war is a distressing oversight that points to the lack of depth in the public discourse today.

South Korea's tortuous, fifty-year drive toward deterrent capabilities offers clarity as to just how complex the issue is. The interplay of security threats and guarantees, of technological potential yet infrastructural neglect, demonstrates the difficulty of relegating the monstrous magnitude of nuclear armament to a simple yes or no question. On one hand, it is necessary to realize that it has always been difficult, if not more so today, for South Korea to seriously move forward with an indigenous nuclear program both on political and technical grounds. On the other hand, one must recognize that today's debate is another point in a half-century endeavor.

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Comparing Contexts: South Korea's Potential Nuclear Armament in the 1970s & 2020s

Taehwa Hong

The 1970s was a turbulent period for the U.S.-ROK alliance. The Nixon Doctrine, America's withdrawal from Vietnam, and detente with the Eastern Bloc exacerbated Seoul's fear of U.S. abandonment. Ties with the United States were further frayed by the Park Chung-hee regime's domestic oppression, which drew concerted criticism from the Congress.

In this context, Park yearned for a deterrent to North Korea independent of the U.S. security guarantee. In early 1972, Park secretly [directed](#) trusted officials to "secure the technology needed to produce nuclear weapons," which are "[necessary](#) for keeping peace."

In the summer of 1974, the CIA station in Seoul reported to Washington on the ROK government's intent to pursue an independent nuclear deterrent. Following intense negotiations between 1974 and 1976, Washington successfully [dissuaded](#) Seoul from fully developing nuclear weapons, through a mix of security assurances, unilateral pressure, and coordination with Western allies. While South Korean interests in nuclear weapons persisted, South Korean leaders have made no serious effort to pursue them since.

The South Korean nuclear armament debate, however, has [grown](#) in 2023 as North Korea advances its nuclear weapons capability. A close examination of the U.S. government's response to South Korea's nuclear weapons program in the 1970s provides important implications for today's discourse.

GLOBAL NON-PROLIFERATION REGIME

For Washington, South Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons was not only a peninsular issue, but also a problem for the global nonproliferation regime. The NPT came into effect in 1970 with strong support from the United States, which feared that domino proliferation could increase the risk of nuclear conflicts or accidental use. Washington was [caught off guard](#) by India's first nuclear weapons test in 1974; wary of a potential nuclear arms race in South Asia, Washington and its Western allies imposed sanctions on India and suspended aid. Successive U.S. administrations had kept a close eye on potential proliferators such as Israel,

Pakistan, and South Korea. The Park government's pursuit of nuclear weapons thus came at a sensitive time when the United States was [scrambling](#) to salvage the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) through the "[Nuclear Suppliers Group](#)"—an initiative intended to regulate exports of sensitive nuclear technology.

In addition to engaging in bilateral negotiations with Seoul, American diplomats worked with their French and Canadian counterparts to stop South Korea's nuclear program. The ROK had launched early negotiations with France and Canada to speed up the nuclear program without alerting Washington—including buying CANDU reactors from Canada for fissile materials, and reprocessing plants from France for plutonium separation from spent fuel. The United States pressured France, which initially [viewed](#) its transaction as a purely commercial issue, into slowing down the negotiation with Seoul. Canada, whose heavy water provision inadvertently helped India's nuclear weapons program, was [central](#) in persuading Korea to cancel the reprocessing contract with the French.

In 2023, the United States continues to view non-proliferation on the Korean peninsula from a global rather than a bilateral perspective. [Discussions](#) in Washington surrounding South Korea's potential nuclear armament often focus on the likelihood of a nuclear arms race in East Asia, by both non-nuclear states and existing nuclear powers. They also debate the implications of an East Asian arms race for the Middle East. Washington would likely impose all manner of costs upon Seoul if it tried to go nuclear because of its broader non-proliferation concerns.

Seoul might be tempted to present its case as a "[Supreme Emergency](#)" that requires drastic measures. ROK experts often mention [Article X](#) of the NPT which stipulates a right to withdraw if a signatory "decides that extraordinary events have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country." However, Seoul would have to explain why America's extended deterrence for Korea is significantly weaker than Washington's security guarantees to other allies facing threats from China and Russia, which are not pursuing nuclear weapons.

ALLIANCE MAINTENANCE

In the 1970s, little trust existed between South Korea and the United States when it came to an issue as serious as nuclear weapons acquisition. Washington's retaliatory [suspension](#) of the 1972 U.S.-ROK civil nuclear cooperation agreement and Export-Import Bank loan were connected to deteriorating sentiments in the U.S. toward security commitments abroad and the authoritarian Park regime. Washington was concerned that a nuclear-armed South Korea could act both independently and assertively against American wishes. For his part, Park faced a paradox, whereby drastic measures of a weaker client to respond to potential abandonment by the stronger ally inadvertently made it more likely. A mix of U.S. economic coercion and the existing South Korean [fear of abandonment](#) ultimately forced Park to cancel the French reprocessing deal and scrap the weapons program in its entirety.

Current South Korean [advocates](#) of nuclear armament assert that Seoul, a successful liberal democracy, should be trusted with nuclear weapons—ironically echoing North Korea's [own pledge](#) to be a “responsible nuclear power.” However, many experts [worry](#) that the process of developing nuclear weapons could jeopardize the alliance, as South Korea could face staggering economic and political backlash. Moreover, in recent years, the United States and South Korea confronted substantial disagreements over key issues concerning China, North Korea, and Japan. Some Korean foreign policy experts [questioned](#) the tenability of the alliance in hypothetical settings where the strategic environment has vastly transformed, such as the signing of a peace treaty with North Korea. An environment where South Korea obtains nuclear weapons could profoundly impact Seoul's perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

A nuclear-armed South Korea aspiring for [strategic autonomy](#) could behave like [De Gaulle's France](#) after Paris acquired nuclear weapons in 1960 – defying alliance responsibilities for a more nationalist, independent foreign policy. A more strategically autonomous Korea resulting from nuclear armament might further complicate ROK-Japan relations. Given that the U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral partnership is the crux of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, it is unclear if the alliance would survive the ROK's nuclear weapons acquisition. Moreover, Seoul's nuclear weapons development might significantly impact the wider U.S. alliance system in the region as it lacks the same multilateral architecture like NATO and EU in Europe.

ALTERNATIVE SECURITY ASSURANCES

In the 1970s, Washington was initially puzzled by the seemingly paranoid Park regime. There was [growing consensus](#) in Washington that Seoul was “capable of maintaining reasonable defense posture against the North,” potentially even “without American ground combat troops.” North Korea's Six-Year Plan (1971-1976) was a [limited success](#), while the South's economy gradually [surpassed](#) the North through its fast-growing heavy industry. Both China and the Soviet Union were unwilling to sponsor North Korean leader Kim Il-sung's aggressions, as they were each preoccupied with mutual animosity and rapprochement with the United States. Many in Washington considered Park's pursuit of nuclear weapons a gamble based on groundless fear of the North Korean threat and American abandonment.

The issue, however, was as much about perception as about reality. U.S. Ambassador to Korea Richard Sneider noted in his private archives that South Korea was “suffering the agony of self-doubt.”¹ This sentiment was particularly acute following South Vietnam's collapse in 1975, abandonment of Taiwan, and ongoing North Korean provocations. South Korean leaders especially saw Washington's transition from Saigon's staunch ally to a third-party broker as a damning indictment of the U.S. reliability. ROK officials further [saw](#) America's perceived prioritization of the alliance with Japan—which was researching nuclear power without a stern U.S. response—as evidence of potential U.S. abandonment. Sneider pointed out that Seoul harbored a “siege mentality” that psychologically normalized measures as drastic as a secret nuclear weapons program.

Sneider cautioned the Ford administration that an entirely heavy-handed approach to stop South Korea's nuclear program would frighten Seoul. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who initially favored coercive pressure, was persuaded. Ensuing American efforts to thwart South Korea's nuclear program included alternative security assurances. In 1975, Kissinger, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger each gave explicit [defense commitments](#) to Seoul, and transferred modern aircraft including the F-4, F-5, and A-37 to the ROK. The Ford administration emphatically [stated](#) that U.S. military forces in Korea would not be removed. The subsequent Carter administration reneged on this promise and vowed to withdraw American troops, but Seoul's nuclear program was largely dismantled by then.

¹ Generously provided by Daniel C. Sneider, Ambassador Richard Sneider's son and a lecturer in international policy at Stanford's Ford Dorsey Master's in International Policy.

In 2023, many in the West are [puzzled](#) why Seoul is so skeptical of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment. In Europe, America's NATO allies mostly trust the U.S. to uphold its Article V commitments for collective defense. Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not significantly alter U.S. credibility because the Europeans believe an official military alliance with binding commitments creates a context completely different from Ukraine's. The seemingly insurmountable economic and conventional military gap between the two Koreas, buttressed by a treaty guarantee by the most powerful country in the world, renders discussions of a South Korean independent nuclear arsenal absurd to [some](#). Many foreign policy experts even in Korea [point out](#) that Washington is unlikely to bow to blackmail from North Korea—a minor pariah state—at the risk of destroying the credibility of American extended deterrence commitment to states facing even more powerful adversaries such as China and Russia.

However, just as in the 1970s, the nuclear discussion is as much about perception as it is about reality. Popular South Korean characterizations of Kim Jong-un [depict](#) the dictator as erratic, irrational, and reckless. Some in the security establishment [fear](#) he could gamble on a weakened U.S. security umbrella to achieve communist reunification by blackmailing Washington with ICBMs that can hit the American mainland. For the South Koreans, “would the U.S. trade Seattle for Seoul?” is a lingering question. Korean [sensitivity](#) to the perceived “Japanese favoritism” also remains to this day. Korean media across the political spectrum frequently [point out](#) that Washington permits Japan's nuclear fuel reprocessing, while denying the same right to Korea. Beyond the nuclear realm, the general idea that Washington values its alliance with Japan more has been a constant theme in Seoul's foreign policy discussions. Certain conservative elements fear Washington could draw a “[new Acheson line](#)” connecting Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines against China, while excluding South Korea. In the 1970s, America's provision of conventional assistance to South Korea was enough to stop Seoul's nuclear plan as the latter had little choice; in 2023, that may not be enough.

TRANSFORMED REGIONAL STRATEGIC CONTEXT

However, a transformed regional strategic context complicates the feasibility of providing alternative security assurances. Providing a concerned U.S. ally with conventional military assistance was relatively straightforward in the 1970s for two reasons.

First, the Sino-Soviet Split and U.S.-China Detente meant that China tolerated and even embraced the U.S. presence in the region. Conventional U.S. military assistance to South Korea did not irk Beijing, as China was more preoccupied with counterbalancing the Soviet Union. By the early and mid-1970s, a large-scale direct military conflict between China and the Soviet Union was a [realistic possibility](#). Furthermore, China welcomed U.S. political and military presence in the region as a “[bottlecap](#)” on a potential resurgent Japanese militarism. The 1972 Japan-China Joint Communique, which normalized diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing, went as far as to implicitly [accept](#) the 1969 Nixon-Sato Communique's [discussion of](#) the alliance's coverage of Taiwan. As Secretary of Defense Schlesinger [assured](#) South Korean leader Park Chung-hee himself in August 1975, Beijing viewed U.S. military assets in Asia as Washington's leash on problematic U.S. allies, not a blank-check for their adventurism. Ironically, U.S.-China détente—the very context fueling Park's fear of American abandonment—rendered Washington's alternative security assurance to Korea both feasible and convenient.

Second, China was not only unwilling to sponsor North Korea's provocations, but also tepid in protecting Pyongyang's security interests. China was still recovering from the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Maoist fanatics during the Cultural Revolution [criticized](#) the North Korean leadership for being “revisionist.” Tensions at the China-North Korea border resulted in [armed clashes](#) in 1969 and 1970. North Korea sought to exploit the changing geopolitical circumstances, but to no avail. In 1975, Kim Il-sung [visited](#) China to win Mao's support in renewing an offensive on the South while the U.S. was still grappling with the damage of Vietnam; Mao declined. With South Korea not strong enough to threaten China directly, and with no ostensible danger of losing North Korea as a buffer, Beijing held little concern over renewed U.S. security commitments to South Korea.

The strategic environment has now dramatically shifted. U.S.-China great power competition translates into vehement Chinese opposition to a strengthened U.S.-ROK alliance. American officials have [hinted](#) at an expanded role for U.S. Forces Korea beyond the peninsula, and South Korea faces greater [pressures](#) to do more in upholding the U.S.-led liberal international order. Meanwhile, China opposes the U.S.-led hub-and-spokes alliance system, [calling](#) it a “relic of the Cold War.” Any significant moves to enhance U.S. extended deterrence commitments in East Asia will likely be met by fierce retaliation from Beijing. [Economic retaliations](#) similar to during the THAAD row could be re-imposed; even worse, military pressure could be applied – which Kissinger [noted](#) is China’s traditional tactic on weaker neighbors to “teach them a lesson”.

Equally importantly, North Korea has become [useful](#) for China in its competition with the United States. Mutual distrust between China and North Korea runs deep, but their security interests are increasingly aligned in the face of what Beijing [calls](#) “U.S.-led encirclement.” Deterioration in broader U.S.-China relations over issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea could provoke China into encouraging North Korean aggression. China prefers that U.S. military assets and political attention are fixed on North Korea, which might otherwise be deployed directly against China.

CONCLUSION

Seoul and Washington will have to communicate intensely to ensure that the nuclear debate does not undermine the alliance. Alternative security assurances from the U.S. will be crucial, taking into account South Korea’s perception of the North Korean threat, American credibility, and alliance discrimination. Intensified U.S.-China competition and a strengthened China-North Korea alliance will continue to pose challenges. Just as the Vietnam War propelled ROK’s nuclear aspirations in the 1970s, failure to fend off North Korean aggression or Chinese revisionism in the region would radically dial up the nuclear debate.

Park Chung-hee decided to relinquish the nuclear program in hopes that the U.S. will “[protect](#) South Korea from any types of North Korean attacks”. When Jimmy Carter proposed to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea, Park allegedly regretted his decision to forgo the nuclear program. He, however, successfully betted on Washington’s security establishment to resist Carter’s agendas – solid institutionalization of the U.S. security guarantee ultimately saved the alliance. American commitment to ROK will have to be independent of DC politics, firmly rooted to shared values and interests.

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U.S.-ROK Alliance Consultative Mechanisms: Strengthening Deterrence, Providing Reassurance, Facing an Enduring Challenge

Paul Choi

"We go together" is a [pronouncement](#) often made in the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) – United States (U.S.) alliance. To realize this unity between the two allies, the alliance has a myriad of diverse consultative mechanisms. These range from presidential summits that have established [joint visions](#) for the alliance to crisis management teams that have designed combined operations in response to provocations. The mechanisms collectively reflect the breadth and depth of ROK-US security cooperation, as well as the increasingly complex strategic environment in which the alliance operates. Their establishment and evolution provide context to better understand ROK discourse on nuclear armament.

The alliance's consultative mechanisms are a manifestation of the [commitment](#) by South Korea and the United States to mutual defense and a signal of the U.S. [pledge](#) to provide extended deterrence for the ROK. They are also tools of alliance management. "Consultation" encompasses a range of activities, including but not limited to the exchange of perspectives, collective deliberation, transactional negotiation, and post-decision notification. The way these mechanisms are used, as well as the content of the consultations, both reflect and influence intra-alliance dynamics. Across time, the exchanges shape the culture of the alliance and its members—including the way in which each country understands deterrence dynamics.¹

This paper examines alliance consultative mechanisms focused on countering North Korea's nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and on U.S. nuclear extended deterrence. It assesses how these consultative mechanisms adapted to changes in the North Korean threat, represented the views of each ally on deterrence and reassurance, and facilitated alliance cohesion in certain areas of policy. It will also identify where progress has been limited, leaving an enduring challenge that left unaddressed will fuel the nuclear armament debate among the policy elite in South Korea.

A DIALOGUE TO ADDRESS EMERGING DETERRENCE CHALLENGES

In committing to provide extended deterrence for South Korea, the United States draws on the [full range of its military capabilities](#), including its nuclear weapons. This was the case even before North Korea posed a nuclear threat; as early as 1950 the United States conspicuously [avoided dismissing nuclear use](#) as an option in the Korean War. However, [official dialogues](#) with South Korea regarding U.S. extended nuclear deterrence only began in 2010, following North Korea's second nuclear test and the launching of the Unha-2 long-range missile. These events inspired concern both in [South Korea](#) and the [United States](#) about emerging deterrence challenges – alliance de-coupling and a stability-instability paradox – that a nuclear North Korea with long-range missiles could pose.

Through the 2010 establishment of the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) with South Korea and the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) with Japan, the [United States aimed](#) to comprehensively strengthen the regional deterrence architecture in Northeast Asia and bolster alliance cooperation. The EDPC consultative mechanism was also an effort to address ROK security concerns and make the U.S. pledge of extended nuclear deterrence "[more concrete](#)."

These concerns included the ROK government perception that the U.S. "[declaratory policy commitment was insufficient](#)" to deter North Korea. This ROK judgement was based partly on the alliance's failure to deter North Korea's 2010 sinking of the ROK Navy ship Cheonan and its shelling of Yeonpyong Island—[aggression that was considered likely to continue](#) in the context of North Korea's leadership transition and an increasingly credible nuclear shadow.

¹ Observations of the author (ROK national) who, as a strategist/international specialist employed by U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and in support of various teams in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), was part of working-level ROK-U.S. operational and policy consultations from 2013-2018.

South Korea sought greater understanding of the U.S. commitment to provide nuclear extended deterrence, given President Obama's [pledge](#) to reduce the role and number of U.S. nuclear weapons amid an increasing North Korean threat. The ROK government also [sought](#) greater visibility into U.S. nuclear planning, decision-making, and operations—all of which remained opaque to it, despite South Korea's vital national security interests depending on these U.S. activities.

Through joint studies and analyses, in addition to bilateral table top exercises (TTXs), the EDPC provided a mechanism to exchange views on the North Korean nuclear threat and to design a more comprehensive collective approach to deterrence across armistice and wartime. This resulted in the 2013 ROK-U.S. Tailored Deterrence Strategy (TDS)—a ["strategic framework"](#) that ["strengthens the integration of alliance capabilities to maximize their deterrence effects."](#) The strategy [signaled](#) bilateral agreement on leveraging not only the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but also the conventional strike and missile defense capabilities – of both the United States and South Korea – to deter North Korea's nuclear and other WMD threats.

Specifically, the TDS identified distinct U.S. and ROK assets to be used together in support of [three deterrence-focused lines of effort](#): encouraging restraint, denying the benefits and raising the costs of North Korean nuclear, WMD, or ballistic missile use. In this way, the [TDS](#) was meant to guide bilateral planning and force development, to meet the changing deterrence challenge North Korea posed. South Korea and the United States also agreed on "Concepts and Principles for Comprehensive Alliance Counter-Missile Operations" (also known as the "4D Strategy" to detect, disrupt, defend, and destroy) through another consultative mechanism, the Counter-Missile Capabilities Committee (CMCC). This strategy further facilitated efforts to achieve ["synergies and efficiencies"](#) in the combined force through better coordination of capabilities South Korea and the United States were planning separately to develop.

The TDS and the 4D strategy are examples of how alliance consultative mechanisms can reorganize disparate national efforts, shape thinking, and forge a common outlook. They induced a broadening of alliance efforts traditionally focused on deterrence by punishment (or cost imposition), to also include efforts to bolster deterrence by denial. This helped advance an alliance position on the need for layered missile defense. TDS and 4D also provided the United States a way to encourage South Korea to think of means

and ways beyond U.S. nuclear retaliation threats to counter potential North Korean nuclear strategies. It also facilitated a framework through which South Korea could later explain how its ["3K"](#) system of non-nuclear strategic capabilities contributed to the alliance's overall deterrence posture.

ADAPTING CONSULTATIONS TO REFLECT A TRANSFORMED THREAT

In 2015, the EDPC and CMCC merged to form the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC). This reflected agreement to better integrate ROK, U.S., and collective alliance efforts to deter the evolving North Korean threat. The focus on deterrence instead of extended deterrence in the new name of the committee was deliberate. This reflected the aim of both allies to underscore the contribution of ROK capabilities, but also to better incorporate them into realizing a combined deterrence posture that complemented U.S. extended deterrence and the nuclear umbrella. The merger was also a response to North Korea's progress toward miniaturizing its nuclear warheads and marrying them to missiles, which provided a reason for the alliance to approach deterring the threats of North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles together.

The [DSC](#) worked to foster mutual understanding of the threat, as well as the capabilities each ally would contribute to a collective posture aimed at deterring North Korean nuclear use. Committee members together visited bases in the United States and South Korea to see U.S. strategic assets and alliance conventional systems firsthand. By [showing U.S. capabilities](#) such as the B-52, Ground-Based Interceptor (GBI) Launchpad, Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and a nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) the United States [sought to reassure](#) South Korea by making the U.S. capacity to extend nuclear deterrence more tangible. Additionally, the United States and South Korea discussed in TTXs ["a number of feasible scenarios involving North Korea's nuclear weapons, to study and understand, in peacetime rather than crisis, the different perspective, priorities, factors, and considerations"](#) that their military and political leaders might face in the future.

In addition to raising awareness of each other's perspectives, in 2016 South Korea and the United States endorsed through the DSC the 4D Concepts and Principles Implementation Guidelines (CPIG). For South Korea, emphasis on realizing a bilateral agreement that underscored "implementation" was an area of much needed progress. South Korea continued to not only seek a more concrete understanding of U.S. strategic capabilities on which it depended as a non-nuclear ally, but also to establish greater agency in U.S. nuclear deterrence operations amid a rapidly transforming North Korean nuclear threat.

Because the practice of deterrence relies as much on other tools of national power, such as diplomacy and economic statecraft, as on military might, South Korea and the United States also established in 2016 an additional consultative mechanism, the high-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG). This body raised official consultations of the DSC at the U.S. deputy assistant secretary level to the assistant secretary level in the United States, and had as its co-chairs representatives from the U.S. departments of defense and state, with counterparts from the ROK defense and foreign ministries. The EDSCG conducted ["comprehensive and in-depth discussions on strategic and policy issues regarding extended deterrence against North Korea, including how to better leverage the full breadth of national power – using diplomacy, information, military, and economic elements."](#)

After a hiatus of five years, reflecting the approaches of both the Moon and Trump administrations to deterrence, extended deterrence, and alliance management, in 2022 the Yoon and Biden administrations reactivated the EDSCG bilateral consultation mechanism. Reiterating the ["U.S. unwavering commitment to provide extended deterrence for the ROK,"](#) the EDSCG and the DSC have continued work on ["how best to tailor"](#) alliance responses to the evolving North Korean threat.

The establishment and evolution of these consultative mechanisms reveal how the alliance has progressed in realizing a more combined and comprehensive deterrence posture. The EDPC, CMCC, DSC, and EDSCG helped forge agreement on the desirability of a holistic approach to deterrence. The changing design of the bilateral consultative mechanisms also reflects how South Korea and the United States adapted to North Korea's expansion and integration of its nuclear and missile capabilities, and enabled greater bilateral inter-agency coordination.

THE ENDURING CHALLENGE OF INTEGRATION AND COOPERATION IN DETERRENCE

The persistence of ROK security concerns and discourse on the potential need for South Korean nuclear armament should not be surprising. The deterrence and reassurance challenge for the alliance continues to be formidable. It is important to recognize ROK and U.S. progress in realizing a more comprehensive approach to deterrence, in advancing their extended nuclear deterrence consultations, and in establishing policy frameworks to guide more effective deterrence operations. However, amid troubling changes in the North Korean nuclear threat and security environment, it is equally important to acknowledge where consultative mechanisms have previously been limited. Moving forward, it will be important to address the enduring challenge of incorporating U.S. nuclear operations into other efforts of alliance cooperation.

It is noteworthy that progress in strengthening the alliance's deterrence posture has predominantly involved greater integration of ROK advanced conventional assets, leveraging ROK and U.S. non-nuclear capabilities, and considering more non-military activities. Much less has been achieved in integrating South Korea in U.S. nuclear operations or adapting the U.S. strategic nuclear posture to address the established nuclear threat North Korea now poses. Failure to address this lack of change amid the increasing nuclear challenges the alliance faces will only fuel debate in South Korea about nuclear armament. Simply, more of the same consultations and demonstrations of U.S. strategic assets, without greater ROK integration, will no longer meet deterrence and reassurance requirements.

This is not to dismiss the importance of regular consultations, current deployments, or exercises. Nuclear crisis may develop in countless and unpredictable ways. Given this uncertainty, the institutionalization of consultation processes and the pre-crisis discussions of the DSC and EDSCG are tangible tools that should support an adaptive alliance nuclear posture. This too is a requirement for alliance cohesion and should strengthen deterrence.

However, policy discussions to foster shared understanding of the threat and a common approach to deterrence, though critical are insufficient. If nuclear deterrence is to be effectively waged, it must not remain only a subject of policy discussions but must be implemented through active preparations that raise the credibility of declaratory statements. The DSC and EDSCG should include review and assessment of policy implementation. Policy should guide but also support, and be informed by, the forces tasked to wage deterrence and operate against nuclear threats.

To address this policy-operations divide, the alliance should work to better integrate U.S. nuclear and alliance conventional planning. South Korea and the United States should better prepare ROK forces to operate in support of U.S. nuclear operations and to be capable of conducting missions after nuclear use by either North Korea or the United States. Integration should go both ways. Alliance work on coordinating how ROK non-nuclear strategic forces can be used to enhance deterrence is important, but so too is incorporating U.S. nuclear assets into an alliance posture and strategy focused not only on “fight tonight” readiness but also on active operations to “deter today.”

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SECTION II: DOMESTIC DISCOURSE

Longitudinal Attitudes in South Korea on Nuclear Proliferation

Karl Friedhoff

INTRODUCTION

The discussion in South Korea surrounding nuclear armament has grown increasingly serious over the past decade. It went from a largely taboo subject, to one that was discussed quietly among a select group of political elites, to members of the conservative ruling party now [openly calling](#) for South Korea's nuclear armament. Those voices are now [being joined](#) by prominent progressive-leaning foreign policy experts. Importantly, the discussion now goes beyond generic calls for acquiring nuclear weapons. And even President Yoon [identified](#) acquiring nuclear weapons as a potential policy option in the future. There is increasing attention paid to the process of how South Korea would acquire nuclear weapons, and specific details about such a plan are likely not far behind.

This mainstreaming of the nuclear debate is not an attempt to cultivate support among the South Korean public. Rather, South Korean politicians and the foreign policy elite are meeting the public where it already is. Over the past decade, broad support for a domestic nuclear weapons program has been one of the most reliable findings across public opinion surveys in South Korea. Roughly two-thirds of the South Korean public consistently supports such a program, and that support largely cuts across the country's ferocious political and ideological divides.

This broad public support is driven, in part, by several factors: that the denuclearization of North Korea via negotiations is now seen as an impossible goal; the region is headed toward greater competition and potentially conflict; the United States is afflicted with unpredictable domestic politics; and a growing perception that China represents a significant national security threat.

Less well understood—and less tested in surveys—is the robustness of support for nuclear weapons. The public is rarely asked about the consequences of proliferating and how those consequences might influence their thinking. Moreover, the surveys that have sought to investigate this further have reached counterintuitive results.

LONGITUDINAL ATTITUDES ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Perhaps the single-best source on South Korean attitudes towards nuclear weapons over time is polling from the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Asan has been asking about support for domestic nuclear weapons since 2010, creating a trend data set going back more than a decade. In that data, majorities consistently support a South Korean nuclear weapons program.

There are occasional dips in that support, such as 2018, when support dipped below 60 percent for the first time since 2011. The reason for this dip is likely best explained by optimism running high due to the Singapore Summit in June between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. The summit was officially announced in [early March 2018](#) and the unprecedented nature of the meeting likely created widespread belief that a significant deal was possible. The Asan polling was [conducted in late March](#) and respondents would have been aware of the announcement of the Singapore Summit.

This dip in support was also apparent in polling conducted by the East Asia Institute (EAI). In a [survey conducted in May 2018](#)—after the announcement but before the summit took place in June—support for a domestic nuclear weapons program fell to 43 percent from 67 percent in 2017. The 24-percentage point drop in the EAI polling is highly unusual for polling on any topic and is a magnitude greater than the 9-percentage point drop in the Asan polling. By 2021, support for a domestic nuclear weapons program had [returned to 60 percent](#) in EAI's polling.

More importantly, these drops in support are probably not repeatable as optimism for North Korea's denuclearization has faded. In Chicago Council-Carnegie Endowment [polling](#) in late 2021, 83 percent said it was unlikely that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons, with a majority (59%) saying it was very unlikely. Any future negotiations will have to contend with the legacy of the Singapore and Hanoi summits, and the public is unlikely to ever hold such optimism again.

Table 1. South Korean support for nuclear weapons – Asan Institute polling ¹													
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Developing Nuclear Weapons													
Support	56	63	66	63	61	62	60	64	55	67	69		70
Oppose	45	37	34	37	39	38	40	36	45	33	31		28
Reintroducing Tactical Nuclear Weapons													
Support				67				62		46	61		59
Oppose				29				38		48	25		38

Another notable feature of attitudes on nuclear weapons is the sheer consistency across a society with simmering societal conflicts that cut across age cohort, gender, and political ideology. Rather than divides, nuclear weapons are an area with which there is now broad societal agreement. Especially important is the agreement between supporters of the conservative People Power Party and the progressive Democratic Party. On several issues related to national security and foreign affairs, these parties take different approaches—at least rhetorically—on North Korea, China, and sometimes the United States. As of yet, nuclear weapons have not been a part of any official party platform, but that day may not be far off. And if it does come, such a platform will not be dismissed outright. Rather, the public may wonder what took so long.

Polling from the Chicago Council and Carnegie Endowment makes this broad societal agreement clear. In the late 2021 [joint survey](#), 71 percent favored a domestic nuclear weapons program. It is also illustrated the agreement across society. Both men (76%) and women (67%) support a domestic weapons program, at least 65 percent of all age cohorts say the same, as do 67 percent of supporters of the progressive Democratic Party and 82 percent of the conservative People Power Party.

These findings were confirmed by a [mid-December 2022 poll](#) conducted by Hankook Research, with 67 percent overall in favor and majorities of all ages, regions, and party support in agreement.

Another notable feature is that support for a nuclear weapons program does not appear to be overly sensitive to question wording. The wording used by the Asan Institute positions a South Korean nuclear weapons program as a direct response to North Korea's nuclear weapons development as does the wording used in the East Asia Institute surveys. However, the Chicago Council-Carnegie Endowment polling and the more recent Hankook Research survey omit this reference to North Korea and frames a nuclear weapons program more neutrally. Results are similar across all four surveys.

Taken together, the data suggests that the support for a domestic nuclear weapons program is robust, long-standing, and unlikely to dissipate. There is some evidence that support for a nuclear weapons program reacts inversely to hope for a breakthrough with North Korea. Across multiple surveys, support for a nuclear program dipped as the announcement of unprecedented summits led to hopes of a real breakthrough. That sets an impossibly high precedent and even if there are future summits, the effect on public opinion is unlikely to be repeated.

HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIOS

While baseline support for a domestic nuclear weapons program has been a standard feature of polling for at least the past decade, relatively less work has been done on the underlying reasons for support. Theories of support for hypothetical South Korean nuclear weapons range from pure self-defense to using those weapons as a bargaining tool so that North Korea and South Korea could pursue denuclearization simultaneously. There are also theories linked to U.S. credibility.

¹ Chart by author. The chart style and data from 2010 to 2020 are taken from the Asan report, "[Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion](#)." 2022 data is from Asan's "[South Koreans and Their Neighbors](#)." The question was seemingly not asked in 2021.

One of the most recent studies was done in 2020 by Lauren Sukin in a publication for the Journal of Conflict Resolution. In baseline questioning, [Dr. Sukin's study](#) found that 68 percent support a nuclear weapons program, but then went on to test how those attitudes were linked to the credibility of the United States. Her findings run counter to traditional proliferation theory. That theory suggests that as U.S. credibility degrades support for nuclear proliferation will rise. Instead, she finds that the opposite is true. She calls this “unwanted use theory” which postulates that the U.S. commitment is too credible. This results in fears that the United States could escalate too quickly in a conflict with North Korea, putting South Korea at risk of nuclear retaliation from North Korea. Thus, public support for a domestic nuclear weapons program increases as U.S. credibility increases. The aim of a nuclear weapons program is thus to ensure that South Korea is more firmly in control of the decision to use nuclear weapons.

Here, the 2021 Chicago Council-Carnegie Endowment polling is instructive. Its findings align with Dr. Sukin's unwanted use theory. For every step up in confidence in perceived U.S. credibility,² support for nuclear weapons³ also increases. Although, it is worth noting that majorities of all confidence levels supported a domestic nuclear weapons program.

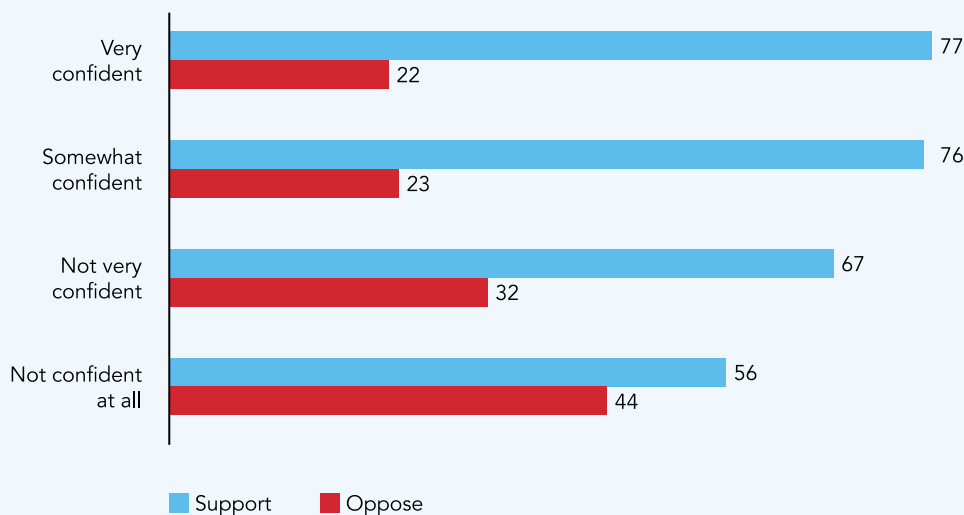
As shown, 77 percent of those that were very confident support a nuclear weapons program as did 76 percent of those that were somewhat confident. Among those that were not very confident, that number slid to 67 percent and among those that had no confidence it was 56 percent.

A different version of this graphic appeared in a previous report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs titled [Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons](#).

Support for Nuclear Weapons x Confidence in U.S. Credibility

Q: Another option is for South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons. Do you support or oppose South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons program?

Q: How confident are you that the United States will defend South Korea if there is a conflict between South Korea and North Korea?



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,363

Chicago Council-Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Survey

A different version of this graphic appeared in a previous report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs titled [Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons](#).

² Question wording: How confident are you that the United States will defend South Korea if there is a conflict between South Korea and North Korea?

³ Question wording: Another option is for South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons. Do you support or oppose South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons program?

This puts the United States in a potential bind and highlights the public-elite divide in South Korea. As the region trends towards more conflictual relationships, South Korean elites are calling for ways to shore up the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea. This often focuses on extended deterrence and President Yoon recently [claimed](#) that South Korea and the United States were discussing joint nuclear exercises—an assertion President Biden later denied. However, extended deterrence and nuclear exercises are both beyond the understanding of the Korean public at large. But the larger message likely penetrates the public conscience—that the United States stands ready to defend South Korea if it is attacked. And as the credibility of that commitment increases, so too will South Korean support for a nuclear weapons program.

This increase in support may not manifest through ever increasing rates of support. Roughly 25 percent of the South Korean public seem to oppose nuclear weapons of any kind in South Korea. This opposition is not based on security concerns but rather on a moral opposition to nuclear weapons more broadly. This type of opposition is less likely to shift with changes in the geopolitical context. This suggests that support for nuclear weapons may already be near its ceiling barring an external shock that rapidly shifts attitudes of those that oppose nuclear weapons.

CONCLUSION

While it is not definitive and the subject needs further study, the data suggests that South Korea and the United States are caught in a reassurance trap. As South Korean administrations calls for nuclear exercises or even nuclear sharing with the United States in an effort to reassure the South Korean public—a public that already sees the U.S. commitment as highly credible—it will feed public concern that the United States could escalate too quickly. In turn, this will harden public support and increase political calls for nuclear armament. To undermine those calls the South Korean administration then seeks further reassurance from the United States, starting the cycle all over again.

How this cycle can be broken is not clear. The United States publicly revealing that its defense plans for South Korea does not include a nuclear response to a North Korean first would have unpredictable consequences both in South Korea and more broadly. But until the alliance can find a way to break that cycle, calls for South Korea to pursue its own nuclear weapons are going to grow louder, presenting both sides of the alliance with discussions they do not want to have and decisions they do not want to make.

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Beyond U.S. Credibility Concerns: Factors Driving the Nuclear Weapons Debate in South Korea

Jennifer Ahn

One of the most commonly discussed factors driving South Korea's nuclear weapons debate is South Korean questioning of U.S. defense commitments. Commentators argue that given North Korea's ability to threaten the United States with nuclear weapons, South Korean doubts over de-coupling and whether the United States would trade "Seoul for LA" have increased. However, a 2022 [poll](#) conducted by Seoul National University shows that 70.6 percent of surveyed South Koreans believe that the United States will come to the defense of South Korea, in contrast to the 26.3 percent who believe that the United States will abandon its security commitments in favor of national interests. Furthermore, support for the U.S.-South Korea alliance and confidence in U.S. defense pledges have not experienced any drastic reductions despite the increasing public favorability for nuclear weapons acquisition.

The current debate in South Korea can be viewed as a direct reflection of the emerging narrative that only South Korean actions, solutions, and independent capabilities can reliably resolve the North Korean threat and achieve stability on the peninsula. This idea reflects South Korean desires to have agency over their own security and is thus shaped by factors beyond U.S. credibility concerns, including: threat perceptions and policy options toward North Korea; perceived gaps in South Korean indigenous conventional capabilities; geopolitical developments shaping a new nuclear age; the weakening influence of normative restraints; and nationalist sentiment.

NORTH KOREA

There are two ways in which North Korea influences the South Korean public debate over nuclear weapons. First, advancements in North Korea's military capabilities have altered the South Korean public's threat perception toward North Korea. In 2022, North Korea test-launched cruise, ballistic, and submarine-launched missiles from diverse launch sites and delivery systems. South Korean experts [note](#) that North Korea has moved beyond the development phase of its nuclear weapons program and is now in a

new operational and verification phase of prioritizing the diversification, miniaturization, and deployment of its weapons arsenal. Furthermore, the September 2022 North Korean nuclear law has codified the elements of preemption and offensive readiness, adding to the broader threat that North Korean nuclear weapons pose.

Nuclear proponents in South Korea [argue](#) that the nuclear doctrine should be viewed as a North Korean declaration of victory since the outlined conditions of nuclear first use allow North Korea to both utilize its nuclear weapons as a coercive tool and possess an "absolute advantage" in the arms race between the two Koreas. As North Korea works to reduce the inter-Korean power asymmetry through advancements in both conventional and nuclear capabilities, South Korean perceptions of its increasing vulnerability to a North Korean attack will continue to drive arguments for an indigenous nuclear weapons program.

Second, broader South Korean public sentiment that the denuclearization of North Korea is unfeasible has led to calls for a change in policy toward the north. South Korean assessments of prospects for denuclearization and hopes for successful dialogue are at their lowest point in decades. This has led to calls for the abandonment of a denuclearization-focused policy toward North Korea and a shift to a policy of nuclear balance, with experts even [arguing](#) that only nuclear balance can achieve mutual denuclearization.

The perceived unlikelihood of North Korea abandoning its nuclear weapons program has contributed to the growing influence of arguments that the United States and South Korea must confront reality, acknowledge that past efforts to denuclearize North Korea have failed, and accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. With denuclearization no longer viewed as a realistic policy objective, especially in the short term, the South Korean public increasingly views strengthening South Korea's defense posture and deterrence as its first defense priority, justifying arguments for a more aggressive approach to ensure peace on the Korean Peninsula.

GAPS IN CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE

The next factor relates to a South Korean belief that its conventional deterrence and defense capabilities are insufficient against the increasingly sophisticated nature of North Korea's weapons program. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has revitalized the implementation of the "[Three-Axis System](#)" as South Korea's primary response mechanism against North Korean attacks in order to bolster South Korea's conventional deterrence.

However, gaps in the credibility and reliability of the three axes – Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR) – have led to concerns over South Korea's ability to effectively demonstrate its conventional deterrence. South Korean specialists [note](#) that holes in missile defense systems, recent malfunctions involving offensive strike capabilities, and insufficient missile stockpiles indicate the lacking and compromised nature of South Korea's conventional deterrence. Meanwhile, North Korea continues to advance both its missile and nuclear capabilities, leading a number of South Korean analysts to [conclude](#) that conventional deterrence is insufficient in properly addressing North Korea's conventional and nuclear threats.

South Korean perceptions of its lagging capabilities, particularly as North Korea accelerates its military modernization, will likely fuel arguments for investing in nuclear capabilities as a means to overcome gaps in conventional deterrence. While U.S. capabilities provide both conventional and nuclear deterrence, South Korean assessments of its ability to deter a North Korean attack primarily focus on its independent capabilities, reflecting a desire for a more self-reliant and autonomous defense posture in which South Korea does not entirely depend on an external actor for its defense and survival.

PERCEPTIONS OF A NEW NUCLEAR AGE

Geopolitical developments have shaped the so-called "new nuclear age" both on the Korean Peninsula and globally. This age has been driven by [national insecurities](#), [expanding nuclear uncertainties](#), and [the enhanced geopolitical role of nuclear weapons](#). If North Korea's prioritization of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities to strike the United States was reminiscent of the first nuclear age in which countries focused on developing strategic nuclear weapons, a new nuclear age informs North Korea's current focus, which South Korean analysts [note](#) involves tactical nuclear weapons intended to directly target South Korea.

Furthermore, South Korean experts [highlight](#) the new era's trilateral nuclear competition between the United States, China, and Russia as a factor that drives accelerated military modernization and increases the risk of nuclear consideration. In an age of unpredictable nuclear usage and weakening nuclear taboo, a growing number of South Koreans believe only the possession of nuclear weapons can properly prepare the country for the unpredictability and instability that will follow North Korean possession of both tactical nuclear weapons and ICBM capabilities.

This new nuclear age also stems from geopolitical developments involving Russia and China, North Korea's closest allies. The war in Ukraine has led some in the South Korean public to argue that only the possession and presence of nuclear weapons can deter an invasion, believing that a nuclear-armed Ukraine would not have been invaded in the first place. The perceived similarities between South Korea and Ukraine both facing a nuclear neighbor who relies on nuclear threats to prevent U.S. involvement – despite the fact that South Korea is a U.S. treaty ally and Ukraine is not – have lent credence to South Korean arguments that it must develop a self-reliant defense strategy consisting of nuclear weapons. For South Korean analysts, the war has also [indicated](#) the difficulties of overpowering a nuclear-armed country with conventional capabilities and carrying out an all-out offensive under the threat of nuclear escalation.

In addition to the Ukraine factor, South Koreans are paying attention to China and a potential Taiwan contingency. There have been parallels drawn between Taiwan and South Korea as both being targeted by nuclear-armed countries with historical and revisionist aims toward reunification. In particular, nuclear proponents in South Korea have [noted](#) that Taiwan is a case study of whether deterrence can be successful without nuclear weapons. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would have serious implications for both North Korea's revisionist ambitions on the Korean Peninsula and the strategic calculus of South Korea's nuclear weapons debate.

WEAKENING NORMATIVE RESTRAINTS

The two primary normative elements that have traditionally constrained South Korean nuclearization are the 1992 [Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula](#) and the NPT. However, the questioning of South Korea's commitment to both agreements has weakened normative restraints and removed the nuclear taboo, which previously labeled serious and high-level discussions of an indigenous nuclear weapons program as fringe or extremist.

Signed in 1992, the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula outlines the commitment of both North and South Korea to not “test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons.” While calls to scrap the agreement have been present ever since North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006, South Korea has continued to uphold the principle of denuclearization outlined in the 1992 declaration as a valuable norm underlying the goal toward peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

However, South Korea’s commitment to the agreement has come under increased pressure as a greater number of voices, including Interim Chief of the ruling People Power Party Chung Jin-suk, have [called](#) for the scrapping of the agreement if North Korea were to conduct its seventh nuclear test. The belief that only South Korea is tied to the principle of denuclearization, despite North Korea’s blatant disregard for the agreement, continues to test the strength of this normative restraint.

Alongside the 1992 declaration, the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) has served as the main global agreement constraining South Korean nuclear armament. Any South Korean argument to develop nuclear weapons has been most strongly opposed by critics pointing to the likely consequences that would follow a unilateral South Korean decision to leave the NPT, including sanctions by the international community and potential damage to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Although Seoul’s commitment to the NPT remains the greatest normative restraint, an increasing number of voices are [calling](#) for the country to exercise its right to withdraw.

Nuclear proponents argue that the sophisticated and offensive nature of North Korea’s nuclear program now explicitly threatens South Korea’s survival, meeting the conditions outlined by Article Ten of the NPT that allows the withdrawing country to avoid international sanctions. While the Yoon administration has thus far maintained the country’s commitment to the NPT and the principle of global nonproliferation, it is likely that supporters of a nuclear South Korea will continue to call for the government to invoke Article Ten to formally withdraw, testing the effectiveness and persuasion of the NPT to restrain South Korea’s nuclearization.

NATIONALISM

Lastly, nationalist sentiment has also contributed to the active and widespread nature of the debate, albeit to a lesser degree throughout this year. The argument that has most captured proponents is that North Korea holds South Korea “hostage” with its nuclear weapons. Hong Joon-pyo, mayor of Daegu and former leader of the conservative party, has even likened the South Korean people to “[slaves under North Korea’s nuclear blackmail](#).” Thus, nuclear weapons are viewed as a necessary tool to weaken North Korea’s perceived advantage in military capabilities and ability to control South Korean actions through nuclear provocations or coercion.

While South Korean conventional capabilities exceed those of the north, supporters of nuclear acquisition [argue](#) that such capabilities do not have the same “political and psychological effects” as nuclear weapons. As North Korea continues to conduct provocations and South Korea believes its response options are narrowing, the argument for South Korea to possess nuclear weapons to achieve unquestionable superiority against North Korea will likely gain prominence within the mainstream debate.

CONCLUSION

The South Korean debate over nuclear weapons development has garnered unprecedented attention and activity in response to changing peninsular, regional, and global dynamics. This paper has provided a holistic overview of the factors underlying the nuclear debate across a wide range of sources and voices in South Korea. However, it is important to note that the debate to date reflects various public perspectives that might influence South Korea’s future policy direction rather than a government-driven policy decision on nuclear development, despite President Yoon’s [comment](#) on South Korea’s nuclear option.

How the United States and South Korea cooperate within the alliance to jointly respond to such sentiments will be crucial in determining how the South Korean public views the opportunities and costs associated with nuclearization.

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A Nuke for a Nuke? Public Debate and Political Party Views on Nuclear Acquisition in South Korea

Erik Mobrand

Erik Mobrand

The possibility of independent South Korean nuclear acquisition has become a topic for analysis in American policy discussions, where much has been made of polls showing more than two-thirds of sampled South Koreans supporting their country acquiring nuclear weapons. However, these poll results should be read with circumspection. There are questions about whether respondents consider the consequences and questions about the logics behind this stated support. Voters in South Korea might not be happy if their elected leaders decided to build nuclear weapons, only to find the economic and diplomatic consequences disastrous. Representative democracy works by giving power to elected leaders to make the tough decisions. Democracy is not a survey.

Popular views, ostensibly revealed through surveys, do not necessarily inform political and public debate. It can also work the other way around. Polls, punditry, and press treatment can become resources for other purposes. Far from reflecting views on an issue, analysis and reporting can be used to will an “issue” into existence. U.S.-based researchers should understand the state of public discussion in South Korea over nuclear acquisition, not least so that they can come to grips with the consequences of public claims they might make.

For reasons that [are known](#), South Korea could have a debate over the acquisition of nuclear weapons. North Korea’s shifting capabilities mean that there might be changes in the priorities of the United States and South Korea. In a democracy like South Korea, such a debate might also become a matter of partisan or popular struggle.

That discussion, though, has largely not materialized.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE NUCLEAR QUESTION

No major political party takes a firm stance on the issue. Neither of the two largest parties have adopted a position, either formally or informally, on nuclear acquisition.

When politicians have made statements on acquiring nuclear weapons, it has been members of the People Power Party (PPP) of President Yoon SukYeol. For example, Rep. Kim Ki-hyun [said in October 2022](#) that “if we can, having nuclear weapons would raise the Republic of Korea’s defense.” He continued discussing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), saying the “NPT is an unfair agreement.... Given the extent of North Korea’s nuclear weapons, then under emergency conditions we can also leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty.” The unfairness referred to is that a few powerful countries are permitted to have nuclear weapons while others are not. A spokesperson for the party [later confirmed](#) that South Korea can pull out of the NPT under emergency circumstances.

The highest profile statement came from the president. President Yoon, in January 2023, [told a policy briefing](#) that nuclear acquisition, or nuclear deployment from the United States, could become reasonable responses to the threat from North Korea. The comment received domestic and international attention, as South Korean leaders have not broached the subject over the past three decades.

The Democratic Party (DP), which holds a majority in the National Assembly, has said less on the matter. One can imagine DP members, keener on security through fostering peace and dialogue with North Korea, might oppose placing nuclear weapons on South Korean soil, whether they were under domestic or American control. The opposite can also be imagined: in some foreign analysis of South Korea, it is suggested that nationalistic progressives, concerned with national autonomy, would [champion nuclear armament](#). However, there is no evidence for this possible development.

DP responses to PPP references to independent nuclear acquisition [have been dismissive](#), presumably because there are few serious arguments to which to respond.

A former legislator from the minor Justice Party, a progressive party with only a handful of seats in the National Assembly, has [dismissed the notion of independent nuclear acquisition](#) on the grounds that the United States would not permit it and that if South Korea proceeded, the country would become a pariah.

The DP holds together a coalition of reformers and other politicians, known colloquially as “watermelons,” who differ little on many policy matters from their PPP counterparts. They are certainly not all nationalist progressives. South Korea’s parties are not aggregates of different viewpoints or coalitions of interests emanating from society. There is no subgrouping or constituency within either major party that demands nuclear armament. At this stage, it would be a profound mistake to equate the DP, or a part of it, with an autonomy argument for nuclear weapons.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM

When politicians have endorsed the idea of nuclear acquisition, no serious argument has been put forward. Taegu mayor Hong Joon-pyo, from the PPP, [writing on Facebook](#), declared that “if we do not change the nuclear balance on the Korean peninsula, then it will bring about a situation where the security of the state cannot be guaranteed.” He added, that “if we only cry out with extended deterrence, then where will the effectiveness be once we receive a nuclear attack?” Of course, if South Korea were attacked, then deterrence had, by definition, been ineffective. The comment raises the question of deterrence supplied by U.S. support or through a South Korean nuclear arsenal, without making any sensible remark on the differences between those options.

After a number of PPP figures stated that the country could acquire nuclear weapons, others pulled back from that position. They noted “the reality that the United States would absolutely not permit” it. Rep. Yun Sanghyun said in a radio appearance: “I really want us to have our own nuclear weapons. To tell the truth, the easiest option is a nuke for a nuke, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Yet due to the international loss in trust, the diplomatic and economic consequences, leaving the NPT is impractical, the legislator said. The same happened after President Yoon’s comments in January 2023. His office immediately clarified that the country has no plans or intention to acquire nuclear weapons.

Occasional statements from PPP members on this matter fit a pattern that has been seen with other issues in the last two years. Political actors created electoral resources in anti-feminism and anti-Chinese sentiment. After the PPP installed an anti-feminist spokesman as party head in the summer of 2021, previously-unthinkable statements against women and gender equality [became commonplace in the media](#). On the back of the empowerment of anti-feminism, surveys [showed that a sizeable proportion](#) of Koreans supported the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equity and Family. Nevermind that much public criticism of the ministry was not based on disputing the value of gender equality, polls could be cited as evidence to mainstream and legitimize once-extreme views. On China, too, then-candidate Yoon [appealed to public frustration](#) with the country.

Citing survey results can also quiet skeptics. On China and anti-feminism, the PPP baited the DP to say something unpopular. The same techniques are employed in U.S. domestic and electoral politics. A similar logic could be at work on the issue of nuclear armament, encouraging the DP either to remain silent or make statements that the media could pillory as being out of touch.

WHAT IS ABSENT

The absence of those serious policy proposals is striking. The potential [costs and benefits to nuclear acquisition](#) are complex, and yet – in this country of profound political engagement – party politicians are not coming out to give assessments of those costs and benefits.

One such debate might focus on the serious economic and diplomatic costs and consequences of nuclear acquisition. What are the odds that Seoul would be granted an exception, given the extraordinary circumstances on the peninsula, to withdraw from the NPT? If not given that exception, the move could invite sanctions that would devastate the Korean economy. The country would need a calculation of those costs and a strategy for mitigating them and adapting. Neither has been offered, although [occasional commentaries address those issues](#).

Then there is the issue of the current administration’s own stated policies on North Korea. The security policy [commits South Korea to denuclearization](#) of the peninsula. Seoul would be in an awkward position retreating from those commitments. The government would then need to formulate a new approach to North Korea.

The need for nuclear weapons in the first place might also be debated. Does deterrence work only if South Korea possesses its own capabilities, not relying on U.S. capabilities whether located on Korean territory or nearby? And are nuclear weapons the only way to deter nuclear weapons? An affirmative answer to the latter has been asserted, both by politicians and [by think tank leaders](#). Another way of thinking is that combined conventional South Korean and American forces [work as sufficient deterrent](#).

In sum, critical discussion of nuclear acquisition has not become mainstream. An October 2022 [article](#) in the Korean periodical *Hankyoreh* 21 made this point clear, by examining four key questions and giving contrasting perspectives on each. The questions are: does Korea need nuclear weapons; can it rely on American nuclear weapons; could the United States permit Korea to acquire nuclear weapons; and what would be the consequence of nuclear armament? While not dismissing the case for nuclear weapons, the article demonstrates that proponents have yet to give answers to the big questions.

In a democracy with a public as sophisticated and politically engaged as South Korea's, you would expect to see these issues analyzed extensively. They would be dissected in painstaking detail on YouTube chat programs and feature in newspaper editorials. South Korea might come to have a public, and maybe partisan, debate on nuclear acquisition. To date, it has not.

RESEARCH AND TRANS-PACIFIC FEEDBACK

Analysis in the United States on South Korea and nuclear issues can help clarify Seoul's options. It can do other things, too. Published results, especially from outlets or research institutes in the United States, can become resources in the hands of interested parties in South Korea. When the Washington Post publishes a commentary, a political operator in Seoul sees a chance. When a reputable American research institute puts out survey results, editors in South Korea smile at the clicks soon to come their way. The dual nature of public policy research is such that what appears as objective analysis in one context turns into resources for political or commercial mobilization in another.

There is a strategic dimension, too. Aware that U.S.-based comments can be deployed to legitimize a position, actors in South Korea can encourage discussion from across the Pacific to generate those resources. The purposes could range from simply getting attention to giving South Korea greater leverage vis-à-vis the United States to other motivations that may have little to do with the issue itself.

As a result, commentary in the United States on the nuclear question in South Korea does not stand separate from any discussion on the issue within South Korea. Commentary in this case is not a neutral or objective exercise because it can, reflexively, have effects on the thing it analyzes. Comment on "the discussion" can be an effort to create a discussion.

From the standpoint of public interest – both Korean and American – all of this is disappointing, and dangerous. News media simplify the views of U.S.-based pundits and researchers and then use them as fodder to normalize the argument for nuclear armament in South Korea. This technique does nothing to stimulate careful consideration of a major issue. Intellectuals can be complicit in these efforts, unwittingly or not, which then generate noise on the nuclear issue.

CONCLUSION

If partisan viewpoints shaped debate on nuclear armament, then there would be a degree of helpful predictability to where South Korea stands on this issue given influence from one political party or another. This is not the case. Instead, there is a high level of uncertainty and a lack of clarity. What is said and made public seems to diverge from what is really meant. Some politicians state publicly their desire to see the country acquire nuclear weapons, but these claims appear to be more based on the perception that such statements are popular than any credible belief, as responsible, elected representatives, that the move would be, on balance, good for the nation.

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Detente or Degradation: Would ROK Nuclear Weapons Hinder or Facilitate Inter-Korean relations?

Bo Ram Kwon

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROWESS AND SOUTH KOREA'S THREAT PERCEPTION

South Korea's nuclear threat perceptions have evolved over the years and took a noticeable turn in 2022. This was driven, mostly, by North Korea's actions. Pyongyang has signaled its intention to further advance its nuclear and missile capabilities, including development of tactical nuclear weapons. In 2022, North Korea conducted an unprecedented number of missile tests, increasing the frequency and variety of delivery methods, which complicate South Korean and alliance interception capabilities. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un ruled out the possibility of denuclearization talks and rolled out a new nuclear policy law, which includes a provision for preemptive attack, lowering the threshold for nuclear use. Kim entered 2023 by announcing North Korea would "exponentially increase" its nuclear weapons as a goal for the [year](#).

Against a growing nuclear threat from the North, intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, and Russia's flirtation with nuclear weapons in the war with Ukraine, South Koreans have indicated the need to take nuclear matters into their own hands. Polls in [2022](#) and [early 2023](#) show steady or growing support for some form of nuclear armament, ranging from persuading the U.S. to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons on Korean soil to South Korea developing nuclear capabilities of its own. However, such support appears to be based upon vague or less-informed threat perceptions since public opinion surveys do not accurately factor in the costs and tradeoffs of going nuclear. Most surveys do not measure how such variables might undermine support. Academic research also provides [evidence](#) that public pressure to use nuclear weapons in an escalating crisis may not be as strong as anticipated. As a methodology, survey-based public opinion polls [show distinct limitations](#) in capturing voter attitudes towards nuclear options.

Although it has long been taboo to discuss South Korea's nuclear armament at the government level, circumstances have changed since President Yoon Suk Yeol [said](#) South Korea could acquire its own nuclear weapons if the threat

from North Korea increases. Yoon also said the U.S.-ROK alliance was discussing joint nuclear planning and exercises, but President Biden denied this, thus triggering further controversy about the level of trust between the allies and possibility of Seoul's own independent effort.

It is challenging, if not impossible, to separate inter-Korean relations from South Korea's respective relationships with the United States, China, and the broader array of international relationships surrounding the Korean peninsula. Nonetheless, this paper examines how South Korea could acquire nuclear weapons, namely, by pursuing nuclear latency or by developing its own nuclear arsenal, with primary emphasis placed on how this could impact inter-Korean relations.

EVALUATING THE OPTIONS FOR SOUTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR ARMAMENT

Since late 2022, Korean and U.S. scholars and practitioners have begun to actively exchange views on the prospects of U.S. allies [developing their own nuclear weapons](#). For example, at the first session of the [KRINS-Brookings Joint Conference](#) held on January 11, 2023, the moderator asked the audience for a quick show-of-hands on how they think South Korea should go nuclear. Among approximately 140 people, 43 voted for enhancing U.S. extended deterrence, 6 voted for redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, 12 called for NATO-style nuclear sharing, 21 supported indigenous ROK nuclear armament, and 30 voted for building potential ROK nuclear capabilities. Though ad hoc and crude, this preference ranking is notable as the audience was mainly composed of retired military officers and civilian security experts.

Conferences like these were encouraged by U.S. expert recommendations [to accept that North Korea has nuclear weapons](#) and recognize some form of [arms-control arrangement](#) as the only realistic option to limit North Korea's nuclear arsenal and missile systems. Others claim that ["direct South Korean and Japanese deterrence is an](#)

[increasingly better option](#),” so the nuclear debate should take its own course in East Asia. Reflecting these changes, countries in the Indo-Pacific region have [resumed discussions](#) about the nuclear dimensions of regional security.

South Korea’s ongoing nuclear armament debate revolves around several different pathways to “going nuclear,” including: strengthening the U.S. extended deterrence commitment; redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons; establishing the alliance’s own NATO-style nuclear planning group; creating a nuclear sharing arrangement; or South Korea’s own effort to build nuclear latency or pursue a fully independent, indigenous nuclear weapons program. This paper examines the latter two potential pathways and how they could potentially affect inter-Korean relations.

Acquiring nuclear latency aims to empower South Korea in times of nuclear crises where North Korea is increasingly more likely to use nuclear weapons in the early stages. Benchmarking the case of Japan, this option enables South Korea to enrich and reprocess nuclear material via consultation with the United States. Because this is short of owning nuclear weapons, it is considered legitimate and eligible to avoid substantial sanctions and withdrawal of military assistance or condemnation from the U.S. and the international community.

In theory, having such breakout capacity could create a nuclear balance on the Peninsula, making *détente* via strengthened deterrence more likely. In practice, however, it would be difficult to expect improvement in inter-Korean relations. On one hand, ROK-U.S. relations will be strained since revising the cooperation agreement on the civil use of atomic energy is an uphill endeavor. The U.S. is reluctant to renegotiate the existing deal on the grounds that it adheres to the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the context of Japan is different from that of South Korea. This stance could undermine efforts to harness South Korea-Japan cooperation as well as trilateral security cooperation with the United States, and any sign of weakening alliance or inter-alliance cooperation could embolden North Korea. On the other hand, other allies and partners may also choose to pursue latent nuclear capacities and accelerate the arms race in East Asia. This would further incentivize North Korea’s militarization and hardly create an environment conducive to diplomacy in the region, which would further hamper inter-Korean relations.

Moreover, once South Korea acquires latent nuclear capabilities, it would be difficult to restart denuclearization talks with North Korea as evidenced by the demand for the denuclearization of the “Korean peninsula” and not “North Korea” *per se*. Given that much consultation between the ROK and U.S. would be required to even begin considering

this option, it would be worthwhile to explore ways to shift the age-old denuclearization narrative towards one of “[nuclear responsibilities](#).” This approach could serve two purposes. First, it could help persuade the United States to provide approval for greater nuclear latency. Second, it might help to bring North Korea back to the negotiation table.

Specifically, such an approach may help cultivate “security dilemma sensitivities” and nurture a shared understanding of nuclear responsibilities among and between nuclear and non-nuclear states. This departs from simply debating the “rights” to develop nuclear weapons or the “tradeoffs” of pursuing one nuclear pathway over another. Instead, it shifts discussion towards elaborating and recognizing the unilateral and joint efforts needed to become a responsible nuclear state and contribute to nuclear governance. The introduction of such a narrative entails some risks of its own, including possible discussion of whether to recognize North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state and its far-reaching implications. It may even be viewed as naïve at a time when Russia has suspended its participation in [New START](#) and is shaking the nuclear non-proliferation regime at the core. At the bare minimum, however, it would relieve the pressure of reviving the denuclearization agenda yet possibly help restart negotiations without dismissing it as a whole.

Alternatively, South Korea could develop its own nuclear weapons. Setting aside the debate about the efficacy of this option, South Korea’s nuclear armament may create a balance of fear on the Korean peninsula that could enhance strategic stability. A nuclear South Korea would be free from concerns that the United States may not sacrifice San Francisco for Seoul when confronted by North Korea’s second-strike capabilities. Thus, North Korea may be convinced that South Korea would use its nuclear arsenal for its security and think twice before waging an attack. Some U.S. scholars argue that this option may also enable South Korea to effectively deter North Korea [without straining relations with China](#). South Korea would no longer need to strengthen its security ties with the United States and thus cease to antagonize China, even offering an incentive to assist in engagement with North Korea.

However, whether South Korea’s nuclear armament would lead to *détente* or degradation in inter-Korea relations is uncertain due to the [stability-instability paradox](#). It is possible that North Korea may become even more focused on its nuclear weapons program, muster all resources to further advance its nuclear arsenal, and diversify delivery methods for its tactical nuclear weapons. In other words, South Korea’s nuclear armament would exacerbate the challenges of an already untenable status quo. Furthermore,

South Korea would be particularly vulnerable between when it withdrew from the NPT – which it would have to do to develop its own indigenous nuclear weapons program – and built a substantial and credible nuclear deterrent. The process could take up to several years. The prospect of North Korea entering into nuclear reduction talks would also diminish if South Korea is perceived as weak and North Korea capitalizes on the moment. What is more concerning is that since both Koreas are advancing preemptive strike capabilities and [defense strategies](#), the probability of misperception and miscalculation that leads to nuclear crises may increase and hamper relations indefinitely. With so much uncertainty surrounding the nuclear armament option, it would be risky for South Korea to re-orient its national policy to support it.

Meanwhile, as South Korea becomes less susceptible to nuclear coercion from North Korea as well as neighboring great powers, it could begin to condemn China's coercive behavior in a more upfront manner. Although strategic autonomy and decisiveness is much valued in international relations, such actions may disincentivize China to pressure North Korea to re-enter negotiations. Besides, if South Korea loses its moral ground by developing its own nuclear weapons and withdrawing from the NPT without mutual consent, its diplomatic capacity would be weakened. That is, its ability to harness the multilateral support needed to resume and sustain engagement with North Korea will be significantly reduced and inter-Korean relations will deteriorate accordingly.

[Some advocates](#) of South Korea's nuclear armament offer scenarios in which South Korea embarks on developing nuclear weapons with the silent consent of the United States. In such a scenario, several steps would be introduced to create a nuclear balance on the Korean peninsula as well as induce nuclear disarmament after North Korea executes its 7th nuclear weapons test. This includes South Korea declaring it will withdraw from the NPT and pressuring North Korea to enter nuclear reduction negotiations. On one hand, the goal of realizing complete denuclearization is reduced to "pseudo" denuclearization to persuade North Korea. And, on the other hand, Seoul initiates discussions about forming a trilateral alliance between the ROK, United States and Japan are launched to persuade Washington. However, the multiple assumptions in this scenario make it hardly feasible, so evaluating its impact on inter-Korean relations is not likely feasible given the number of variables. However, there is [value](#) in sustaining the nuclear armament narrative as the shadow of North Korea's miscalculation looms and South Korea needs to prepare against the absolute deterioration of U.S.-China relations that will be consequential to its national security.

CONCLUSION

As the Ministry of National Defense has set its goal for 2023 to enhance South Korea's military capabilities and readiness while strengthening U.S. extended deterrence, the nuclear debate in South Korea has entered a new phase. As South Korea explores a range of nuclear options to maximize its national security, including developing its own nuclear weapons, it is important to navigate its North Korea policy to ultimately build a sustainable peace regime on the Korean peninsula. Focusing on South Korea's nuclear latency or nuclear weapons development alone seems to create an imbalance between deterrence and assurance. Strong assurance mechanisms are needed to move any type of negotiations with North Korea forward.

In closing, the option to acquire latent nuclear capabilities or to develop indigenous nuclear weapons entails higher costs and responsibilities than benefits for inter-Korean relations. The current domestic debate about South Korea's nuclear options is insufficiently backed by clear facts. Nor is it circulated widely enough among opinion leaders and the public to conduct a comprehensive analysis. Moreover, such discussions should not end in normative statements, but instead with practical policy recommendations and implications. At this juncture, a more robust and strategically directed domestic and international debate on the utility of South Korea's armament could facilitate inter-Korean talks in unexpected ways. Given the urgency of the issue, the timing seems ripe for such a venture.

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SECTION III: INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Global Reverberations of a Nuclear South Korea

Jessica Link, Heather Williams

Nuclear risks are rising in East Asia in a way that may create drivers for South Korea to reconsider its nuclear weapons status. Over the last two decades, North Korea has escalated its nuclear threats and conducted a record number of missile tests. Additionally, as China becomes an increasingly revisionist global actor, the potential for clashes over territorial demarcation, such as in the Yellow Sea, is more pronounced. South Korean policymakers might perceive nuclear weapons as a means to ensure security in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

While South Korea is under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, policymakers in Seoul may question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees as they navigate tense regional dynamics. For example, in January 2023, South Korean President Yoon [stated](#), “It’s possible that the problem gets worse and our country will introduce tactical nuclear weapons or build them on our own.” If South Korea decides to pursue a nuclear option, the implications would stretch beyond the regional environment and reverberate throughout the global nuclear order, particularly in the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Public polling suggests that, at least from a domestic political standpoint, nuclear acquisition is potentially feasible. A February 2022 report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs noted that 71% of South Korean respondents favorably viewed the development of independent nuclear capabilities. When asked to choose between an independent program or the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea, [67% of respondents](#) preferred an independent nuclear capability.

Additionally, South Korea has a high degree of nuclear latency, a term which [describes](#) “the possession of some or all of the technologies, facilities, materials, expertise (including tacit knowledge), resources, and other capabilities needed to develop nuclear weapons.” It is one of the top global producers of nuclear energy and has considerable fuel cycle infrastructure under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, including [25 nuclear power reactors](#). There are, however, some weaknesses

in South Korea’s nuclear infrastructure and supply chain that would present challenges to developing a military nuclear capability. South Korea has an [open nuclear fuel cycle](#) and lacks uranium mining capabilities and large-scale enrichment and reprocessing facilities. Moreover, South Korea is highly dependent on imports to support its civilian nuclear program, and trade controls could cripple its nuclear activities.

South Korea is a leader in the existing nuclear order and an active member in the NPT. As a result, any scenario in which South Korea moves towards nuclear acquisition would raise difficult questions about its relationship with the NPT and nuclear norms. Yet the NPT is becoming particularly fragile due to rising nuclear risks in Europe and Asia, Iran’s possible pursuit of nuclear weapons, and deepening polarization between nuclear possessors and non-possessors. Moreover, the erosion of arms control norms and nuclear build-up by [Russia and China](#) are at odds with the NPT’s overarching objectives. If the NPT is further weakened, there may be diminishing legal and normative pressures on South Korea to continue in its NPT leadership role – or to stay in the NPT at all. And if South Korea did leave an already-weakened NPT, it could have disastrous consequences for the treaty generally recognized as the foundation of the nuclear order.

Given these trends, what would a “nuclear South Korea” mean for the NPT? First, the term “nuclear South Korea” requires a definition which entails a spectrum of options from nuclear latency to a fully developed, operational, deployed nuclear capability. The stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on South Korean territory is not part of this spectrum, since the U.S. would maintain control of the weapons and South Korea would continue to rely on an ally for nuclear capabilities, likely remaining in compliance with the NPT. This spectrum of options results in three potential scenarios for a “nuclear South Korea,” including: 1) increased nuclear latency; 2) a nuclear hedging strategy; and 3) an independent, operational nuclear capability. For each scenario, we hypothesize what would motivate Seoul to pursue such a strategy and what would be the implications for the NPT.

Any of these scenarios would entail a difficult trade-off for Seoul, between pursuing an independent nuclear deterrent for security reasons and risking its leadership in the global nuclear order.

SCENARIO 1: INCREASED LATENCY

South Korea could increase its nuclear latency under the NPT. In fact, several former South Korean commanders have [publicly advocated](#) for increasing latency as “a way to deter North Korea’s nuclear threats.” The distinction between this scenario from South Korea’s current nuclear status would be the acceptance of increased diplomatic pressure and suspicions from the international community as a cost for expanding its civilian nuclear activities. Increasing latency would not necessarily be part of a strategy to create a nuclear weapons option, nor is it likely to trigger severe international sanctions and costs, but nevertheless could provide a foundation that could later be leveraged if Seoul later decided to pursue nuclear proliferation.

To increase latency, South Korea might expand existing nuclear capabilities or seek to fill fuel cycle gaps. South Korea might build up its [spent fuel storage and reprocessing capabilities](#), as it has sought to do for decades. For example, South Korea might expand laboratory-scale research, such as the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute’s [laboratory-scale study of pyroprocessing](#) technology in collaboration with the U.S., which has raised [concerns](#) from the U.S. nonproliferation community given the proliferation risks posed by plutonium separation technology.

Of the three scenarios considered here, this scenario would have the least impact on the NPT. The Treaty already includes countries with nuclear latency that could break out of their IAEA limits and quickly pursue a nuclear capability, such as Japan. In this scenario, the impact of South Korea’s nuclear latency would largely depend on wider political trends and atmospherics within the NPT itself. Specifically, the impact may depend on the reaction and pressure from Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) States Parties (SPs). If the TPNW gains momentum and membership in the coming years, its SPs may see South Korea’s nuclear latency as another data point in the failure of the NPT and members’ lack of commitment to Article VI, which commits them to “general and complete disarmament.” Pressure from the disarmament community could work at odds with pressure to pursue nuclear latency as it would also impact South Korean domestic politics, and could generate increased pressure on the government in Seoul to abandon

nuclear deterrence and any nuclear latency posture and instead join the TPNW. While there is no evidence of this today, nuclear latency could draw attention to South Korea and exacerbate domestic and international debates about nuclear disarmament and the NPT.

SCENARIO 2: HEDGING STRATEGY

Alternatively, South Korea might pursue a [hedging](#) strategy. A hedging state “refrains from actively developing nuclear weapons but has not explicitly forsworn the option, putting the pieces in place for a future nuclear weapons program.” Intent is the primary distinction between scenario one (latency) and scenario two (hedging) as hedging would include deliberate steps towards creating and maintaining a nuclear option. In this scenario, South Korea would begin to accept significant economic and diplomatic costs flowing from international perceptions of violating the NPT but would maintain the flexibility to accelerate or decelerate progress towards the nuclear option as strategically necessary.

South Korea’s hedging strategy could take many shapes, likely building off increased nuclear latency or conventional defense capabilities. For example, building up conventional (and potentially dual-use) delivery systems and/or space launch capabilities could allow South Korea to creep towards a deliverable nuclear option without crossing the threshold of weaponization. South Korea’s current conventional military capabilities provide a foundation for a hedging strategy, as it possesses submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and dual-use technology. Given its dependence on imported nuclear materials, South Korea’s hedging strategy might also include increased involvement in proliferation networks to circumvent trade controls. South Korea could tap into existing proliferation networks that operate in East Asia to access the technologies and materials needed to achieve a nuclear option.

A hedging strategy for South Korea would raise questions about its commitment to the NPT and the wider nuclear order. Being open to nuclear development would understandably raise questions from nuclear weapons-states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapons-states (NNWS) alike about Seoul’s commitment to “general and complete disarmament,” and it might elicit condemnations from NPT states parties, being seen as preparing for an arms race rather than working to avoid one. Participation in numerous international initiatives, such as the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND), would also be jeopardized. For the NPT, this would be a test of whether or not the treaty has the

restraining power it once did and whether or not its norms are still effective. It would also test the U.S.-South Korea relationship and could increase pressure on Washington to demonstrate the capability and credibility of its extended deterrence.

SCENARIO 3: FULLY DEVELOPED AND DEPLOYED NUCLEAR WEAPONS

In the third scenario, South Korea would cross the threshold of nuclear weapons acquisition by developing and deploying a nuclear weapon with corresponding delivery systems. South Korea would incur the most significant economic and diplomatic costs in this scenario, but could achieve a more credible deterrent for ensuring its existential security via an independent nuclear capability. In a hypothetical scenario, following the development of a functional nuclear explosive device, South Korea might threaten or conduct a nuclear test if it is viewed as strategically valuable and/or technologically necessary. A South Korean nuclear test might be carried out in response to a nuclear test by North Korea or increased antagonism from China. In this case, South Korea might withdraw from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). South Korea might also test the conventional versions of its nuclear delivery systems to demonstrate the reliability and credibility of its deterrent forces.

If South Korea develops and deploys an independent nuclear weapons capability, it would assumedly withdraw from the NPT in order to do so. This would make South Korea the second country to ever withdraw from the NPT. The first country to do so, North Korea, withdrew in 2003 and was heavily sanctioned and largely treated as an international pariah as a result. South Korea may not face similar condemnation as it is more fully integrated into the international economy and is a well-functioning democracy; but it would likely face sanctions and a change in its relationship with the United States.

While South Korea might choose an independent nuclear capability to enhance its security, it could have a contradictory or even self-defeating effect at the cost of the U.S.-ROK alliance, especially if the U.S. scales back or fully abrogates the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. If South Korean nuclear weapons acquisition came at the cost of U.S. assurances for security on the Korean peninsula, one could easily make the argument that a South Korean nuclear weapon would be strategically counterproductive. The U.S., however, may be unwilling to sever ties with South Korea and lose a strategically located ally in East Asia given the realities of geopolitical competition and military priorities.

The impact of South Korea's withdrawal and proliferation on the NPT would be significant, particularly in the context of follow-on treaty withdrawals. South Korean proliferation could stir distrust and spark arms racing with neighboring countries, such as Japan, China, and North Korea, as they try to navigate more complicated regional dynamics. Japan, in particular, might feel pressure to acquire nuclear weapons to balance against South Korea, further damaging the NPT. Other countries beyond East Asia may look to South Korea as a "successful" example of NPT withdrawal and subsequent nuclear proliferation. South Korean proliferation could also exacerbate current divisions between NWS and NNWS in the NPT, creating a more urgent push for progress on disarmament, especially if the response by NWS is viewed as underwhelming or insufficient.

CONCLUSION

Of all these options, scenario three would have the most significant and negative impact on the NPT as it would likely entail South Korea withdrawing from the treaty, breaking a non-proliferation norm, and potentially setting off a proliferation cascade. It would be difficult for the NPT to survive such a development without major effort on the part of States Parties, along with sufficient notice, planning, and new regulations on the part of South Korea. These scenarios should not be read as inevitable or the only options for South Korea. But they do highlight important trends and questions for leadership in Seoul, U.S. policymakers as a security guarantor, and for NPT members.

Seoul may face a difficult decision between pursuing nuclear weapons for its security and upholding its leadership role in the nuclear order. If Seoul does pursue nuclear hedging or a fully developed capability, this will indicate not only the weakening of the NPT and its norms, but also the diminishing credibility of U.S. nonproliferation policy and extended deterrence. Finally, Seoul's decisions will be indicative of the worsening security environment and the challenge for existing disarmament and arms control tools to adapt.

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Alternative Futures: ROK Nuclear Weapons and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Caroline Milne

An overt, formal decision by Seoul to plan or prepare for the acquisition of an independent nuclear weapons capability by all accounts remains firmly in the realm of the hypothetical as of February 2023, despite concerns accelerated by South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's recent [remarks](#). But, such a decision would cause something of a high-stakes “shock” to the system that is the 70-year-strong alliance between the United States and Republic of Korea (ROK). One important question regarding the “[linchpin](#)” for peace, security, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific is thus whether that system is likely to absorb, implode or adapt to such a shock. While possible alternative futures are many, the logic chain explored below suggests that the alliance would ultimately adapt; if Seoul's calculus could be revised, it could drive enhanced U.S. and ROK investments in extended deterrent laydowns on the Peninsula.

Attuned to the [elusiveness](#) of [proliferation forecasting](#), alliance observers and [defense experts](#) are hedging their bets. The immediate international reaction to a nuclear ROK (or a ROK on its way to going nuclear) is expected to be overwhelmingly negative, with Seoul's actions causing major consternation among and push back from fellow signatories of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Indeed, this reaction would be consistent with the [U.S. response](#) to South Korea's nuclear weapons activities in the 1970s. Beyond the initial nonproliferation crisis, however, robust predictions for the alliance are impossible. This is largely because the alliance is a complex and time-tested relationship, which encompasses a myriad of [joint activities](#), spanning multiple [sectors](#) and [domains](#).

The current analysis is structured to examine U.S.-ROK alliance dynamics in the context of an indigenous South Korean nuclear weapons program. In other words, assumptions regarding the uncertainties of whether, how, or on what timeline the ROK government has been directed

to implement a decision to move forward with a national program are not of concern. Instead, in the posited setting, we are to assume South Korea has already proliferated, or is perceived to have proliferated.** Against this backdrop, an interrogation of alternative futures must begin with an examination of the key factors that U.S. policy-makers could potentially weigh as they contemplate whether to seek to arrest or reverse their ally's choice.

The risk of broader instability inherent in an alliance between the United States and a nuclear ROK would likely be too high for support of the program to be a viable option for Washington. It is true that management of the array of probable proliferation penalties – from UN and bilateral sanctions of [various types](#), to the Nuclear Suppliers Group, just to name a few – for violating the NPT would pose a proximate challenge for the two states, made especially complicated by the U.S. stalwart [role](#) in leading that regime. Yet while painful, that challenge would be a discrete one. Less predictable and less manageable than a counterproliferation campaign from the U.S. perspective would be two cascades of events that could stem from South Korea's choice.

First, a South Korean nuclear arsenal would introduce several new drivers of [nuclear escalation](#) on or around the Peninsula and – with the DPRK reportedly close to acquiring ballistic missiles with intercontinental reach, if it has not done so [already](#) – for the continental United States. These include a heightened temptation for North Korea to execute a preemptive attack against the South Korean program in its infancy, eliminating Seoul's new capability before it presents too complicated a target set; games of nuclear brinkmanship between two relatively novice nuclear powers; and an exacerbation of the [messaging dynamics](#) and chances of misperception, complicated enough between two nuclear powers, let alone three or four given China's potential involvement.

Second, U.S. acquiescence of a nuclear ROK would set a dangerous precedent for other states covered by the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent guarantee, most of whom would be tracking reverberations of the South's actions on U.S.-ROK alliance. Like South Korea, several of those states possess the technological wherewithal (i.e., the materials, expertise, or technical capacity, or combinations thereof) to develop a nuclear weapon, but have not needed to leverage it on account of the U.S. commitment. Weak or non-existent opposition from the United States could thus encourage or activate the nuclear ambitions of others, such as Japan or Taiwan. The unravelling of multiple relationships, and subsequent impact on regional security architectures, would threaten to seriously undermine U.S. interests at a time when Washington is seeking to leverage its allies and partnerships to address a deteriorating threat environment, with the "pacing threat" of China at its core.

A hypothetical future that includes a nuclear ROK is thus equally likely to feature a strong and persistent effort by the United States to persuade Seoul to change its mind. By seeking to alter the (supposed) status quo, the United States would by definition be engaging in a compellence campaign, an exercise of [coercive diplomacy](#) known to students and practitioners of international relations as more [costly](#) and more difficult than the more frequent practice of deterrence.

The upshot: a return to the previously extant state of affairs – with the tools of nuclear statecraft exclusively owned and wielded by the United States – will be viewed as a non-starter by a nuclear South Korea among both the leadership and its populace, if polling and domestic political trends continue. Rolling back the ROK's nuclear aspirations would only get tougher as the program advances. The job will therefore demand further and more tangible U.S. acknowledgement, or deeper internalization of the motivations behind Seoul's need to arm itself with nuclear weapons in the first place. The future posed here could be interpreted as a "[natural outgrowth](#)" of concerns evident today, rooted in the acuteness of the North Korean missile and nuclear threat, and amplified by an erosion of confidence in U.S., ROK, and alliance tools to curb that threat. If the United States is to maintain support from the ROK in the region to counter China, it would be necessary to find new or revive legacy means to "[institutionalize](#)" extended deterrence so that its partner is more vested.

What types of interventions could the United States consider to persuade South Korea to act differently? The counterproliferation toolkit developed and enlisted by the Ford Administration offers a precedent to draw from. While tailored to a very different strategic and normative setting – the threat from North Korea did not include nuclear weapons and multiple classes of ballistic missiles, and the NPT had only recently entered into force – concessions or "carrots" were part of that package. For example, the eschewal of advocacy for troop withdrawals from the Korean Peninsula was purportedly [shaped](#) by the South's signaling that "future behavior would be contingent on American security commitments."

Based on the ebb and flow of U.S.-ROK extended deterrence practice and alliance management over the past fifteen years, shifting Seoul's calculus in this postulated future would require an intervention rooted in the [U.S. nuclear triad](#). This is somewhat disappointing, considering how widely the relationship has broadened over the past twenty years; what began as an exclusively nuclear umbrella now includes extensive engagement in other domains, such as conventional strike and missile defense. Though the sources of strength for U.S.-ROK relations have multiplied beyond nuclear issues, the chances are that non-nuclear concessions (e.g., expanded cooperation in space, for example) will not redress the perceived gap in the U.S. security guarantee. While the Department of Defense's concept of integrated deterrence may ultimately revamp this trade space, a nuclear solution would be needed to address a nuclear problem.

The most direct way to reverse South Korea's pursuit of an independent nuclear program would likely center on "hard power" indicators of nuclear resolve, that is, the physical hardware the United States commits to *nuclear* deterrence on South Korean territory. Nuclear assets in theater dwindled in the early 1990s, when U.S. nuclear weapons were fully withdrawn from the Peninsula as part of the [Presidential Nuclear Initiatives](#). Presidents Biden and Yoon have publicly reopened the debate over forward nuclear deployment, through the joint [reaffirmation](#) of "the commitment of the U.S. to deploy strategic U.S. military assets in a timely and coordinated manner as necessary, as well as to enhance such measures and identify new or additional steps to reinforce deterrence in the face of DPRK destabilizing activities." The administrations [reiterated](#) this commitment at the defense ministerial meeting in Seoul last month.

In theory, the United States could thus implement POTUS' direction and offset its ally's perceived need by beginning to lay the groundwork for the South Korean military to assume some role in the air-breathing leg of the U.S. nuclear triad, currently consisting of a combination of heavy and multi-role stealth bombers, gravity bombs and cruise missiles. The negotiation of a [burden-sharing](#) agreement could cover the reintroduction of gravity bombs to the Peninsula (which could be handled unilaterally or bilaterally), host nation support, and forward deployment of U.S. capability on an allied or dual-operated airfield.

The practicalities of such a process would be non-trivial, demanding no less than the resurrection of an infrastructure for the safe, secure, and NPT-compliant storage of U.S. nuclear weapons on the Peninsula. A complementary set of muscle movements could also be necessary to ensure the U.S. and ROK air forces could be sufficiently trained, organized, and equipped for the deterrent mission (not to mention certified). The precise form of the burden-sharing arrangement would be further circumscribed by capacity

realities on both sides. All such efforts would need to be nested within the existing U.S.-ROK [arrangement](#) on the [Peninsula](#) without sacrificing the readiness of extant forces. All such efforts would also demand careful attention to the concerns of the nonproliferation community (as well as the reaction by the North Korean regime). The alliance would thus incur many types of costs for enhancing its extended deterrent posture, but altogether a worthy bargain in light of the cascading risks a nuclear ROK could set in motion.

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** It is important to acknowledge that the development of an independent nuclear weapons capability can take many forms and typically comprises many steps. [Previous instances](#) of South Korean nuclear proliferation-related behavior [included](#), for example, feasibility studies of nuclear weapons development and interest in importing reprocessing technology; today it might look different. It is the view of this author that while the form of South Korea's proliferation could impact the speed or degree of the U.S. response, it would not impact the core U.S. objective of rolling back the program.

Japanese Protestation and Pragmatism Towards a Nuclear South Korea

Terrence Matsuo

As a close geographic neighbor and diplomatic partner, Japan has a strong interest in the course of Korea's debate to develop an indigenous nuclear capability. Japanese leaders have long grappled with the promises and perils of such weapons, and which have gained even more relevance given the invasion of Ukraine and tensions in the Taiwan Strait. If Korea chose to pursue a nuclear weapon, it is likely that Tōkyō would initially signal its disapproval with diplomatic and economic sanctions, but this may dissipate as Japan has also been pragmatic about working with the partners it has, and not the partners it wants. However, such a radical change in Korean policy would also complicate an already sensitive relationship.

As the only country to have come under a nuclear attack in wartime, Japan has officially been a strong opponent of nuclear weapons in the international system. In the postwar period, it signed most of the major [international non-proliferation treaties](#). Japan signed the [Partial Test Ban Treaty \(PTBT\)](#) in August 1963, which prohibits the testing of nuclear weapons in the air, space, and sea. It also signed the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT\)](#) in February 1970, which sanctions the peaceful development of nuclear technology and prohibits non-nuclear weapons states from developing such weapons. Japan also signed the [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty \(CTBT\)](#) in September 1996, which prohibits nuclear explosions for any purpose. This treaty has not yet entered into force.

Japanese opposition to nuclear proliferation is also reflected in several domestic laws and norms. Chief among these is [Article 9](#) of the constitution, which states that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained" by Japan. Article 2 of the [Atomic Energy Basic Act](#), enacted in December 1955, specifies that "research, development and utilization of nuclear energy is limited to peaceful purposes." While not codified in law, the Japanese government has also been guided by the [Three Non-Nuclear Principles](#). These were first articulated Prime Minister Eisaku Satō in remarks to the Diet in December 1967, and they include "not possessing, not producing and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons, in line with Japan's Peace Constitution."

This opposition to nuclear weapons has been maintained by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who represents a constituency in Hiroshima and is well-acquainted with the horrors of atomic warfare. He chose Hiroshima City to host the next G7 summit later this year, given Russia's loose rhetoric of nuclear use. "It is important to convey the reality of the atomic bombings to the world, including the G7 leaders, as the starting point for all efforts toward nuclear disarmament," [he said](#) earlier this month. Prime Minister Kishida also became the [first Japanese leader](#) to attend the NPT Review Conference last year, where he introduced the "Hiroshima Action Plan" to reduce nuclear weapons. It consists of five parts: recognition never to use nuclear weapons; transparency of nuclear capabilities; reducing nuclear stockpiles; promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy; and promoting visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "I cannot but admit that the path to a world without nuclear weapons has become even harder," said Prime Minister Kishida in [his remarks](#) to the Conference. "Nevertheless, giving up is not an option."

But this commitment to non-nuclear weapons has never been absolute. [Scholars have documented](#) how postwar Japanese leaders have flirted with nuclear weapons despite popular disapproval. The earliest such remark was in May 1957, when then Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi suggested that small nuclear weapons would not violate the Japanese constitution. Prime Minister Satō himself, the man who articulated the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, [is reported](#) to have told President Lyndon Johnson that Japan needed nuclear weapons in order to deter China.

This pattern continued in the [Heisei and Reiwa eras](#), under numerous governments including that of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. In comments echoing his grandfather, he suggested that small nuclear weapons would not violate the Japanese constitution. He was also criticized when he omitted the Three Nuclear Principles during a speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. They eventually were included in his following speech in Nagasaki. Even under Prime Minister Kishida, Tōkyō still has not signed the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), which calls on states not to

develop, manufacture, or use nuclear weapons, and entered into force in January 2021. Although committing Japan to realizing a world without nuclear weapons, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said in 2022 that this cannot be achieved without the buy-in of states with such weapons. “The truth is that none of the nuclear-weapon states has participated in the treaty,” [said](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokeswoman Hikariko Ono.

At this time, Japanese conversations on nuclear weapons have not focused on South Korea. Mainstream media sources have reported on recent Korean public opinion polls, but few [have raised concerns](#) for their implications for Japan. In recent weeks, Japanese officials have engaged Korean officials on at least two occasions. But in the case of [Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno](#) and [Director-General Takehiro Funakoshi](#) of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at MOFA, they have focused on the issue of compensation for former laborers. It seems that for the moment, Japanese officials are focused on the historical issues with Korea, and not the domestic Korean debate on nuclear weapons.

Despite this silence, Japan’s reaction to India’s nuclearization provides some insight to how it would react to Korea. Over two days in May 1998, India conducted a total of five nuclear tests that came to be known as [Pokhran-II](#) from its location in the desert. The Indian diplomat S. Jaishankar [would later recall](#) the “swift and exceptionally harsh” response by Japan. Economic sanctions included freezing existing Japanese aid grants and loans to India, as well as pushing for a review of loans made by international organizations. Diplomatic sanctions included [recalling the Japanese ambassador](#) to Tōkyō, and using international forums like the G8, UN Security Council, and the International Atomic Energy Agency to also condemn India’s tests.

Despite this initial response, Japan would eventually relent in its attempts to punish India. Two years after Pokhran-II, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori announced in 2000 that he would [visit South Asia](#), with a stop scheduled in India. In a [readout of his meeting](#) with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister Mori emphasized Japanese concerns about Indian nuclear weapons. But in exchange for India’s unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and work towards joining the CTBT, Japan announced support for two Indian infrastructure programs. “Time will reassure Japan that there is no automatic spread effect to the Indian nuclear tests and that its own immediate security environment is not adversely affected,” writes Mr. Jaishankar. “Recent history has frequently demonstrated Japan’s pragmatism and there is no reason to suppose that this would not extend to India.” Indeed, the early decades of the 21st century have borne out Mr. Jaishankar’s optimism, and the India-Japan relationship has become one of the strongest in the Indo-Pacific region.

India’s example would be a best-case scenario from Korea’s perspective but may not be the most likely given the differences in NPT membership between [India](#) and South Korea. An announcement by Seoul that it would pursue a nuclear weapon would be met with official condemnation from the Japanese government, and may also involve the recall of diplomatic representation. Economic sanctions and pressure from other international fora would follow. But Japanese pragmatism may eventually win the day should that initial pressure not convince Seoul to reverse course, and see a gradual resumption of relations. During the Cold War, Japan chose not to seek nuclear weapons after the Soviet Union and mainland China developed such capabilities. Assuming South Korea maintained its relationship with the United States, it is conceivable that Tōkyō would come to see that these nuclear weapons pose no threat to Japanese territory.

If South Korea chose to seek an indigenous nuclear weapons capability, it is unlikely Japan would follow suit. Japanese memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [remain strong](#), complicating the political costs of Tōkyō’s nuclearization. It is telling that even when the late former Prime Minister [Abe made waves](#) for his comments on nuclear weapons in February 2022, it was not an outright endorsement for their acquisition. Japan “should not put a taboo on discussions [my emphasis] about the reality we face,” he said during a television program on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This focus on the discussion for nuclear sharing, but not nuclear weapons themselves, is also seen in the results of a [public opinion poll](#) by the conservative Sankei Shimbun and Fuji News Network. The outlets reported that 62.8% of respondents opposed nuclear sharing with the United States, but maintained that it should still be discussed. While Japan may be more comfortable talking about nuclear weapons, there is little appetite to actually do so.

Instead, Japan has been more focused on conventional ways to defend itself. One of the more [significant changes](#) in Japan’s latest national security strategy documents was approval for counterstrike capabilities against enemy bases. The conservative Yomiuri Shimbun ran [an editorial](#) January that said South Korean nuclear weapons would not help the North Korea problem, and reverse progress towards denuclearization. “A realistic measure is to enhance the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, such as by frequently conducting joint U.S.-South Korean military drills using U.S. bombers that can carry nuclear weapons,” the editorial said. While Japan and Korea both share concerns about regional security challenges and the relationship with the United States, the former finds it more acceptable to focus on conventional capabilities, rather than weapons of mass destruction.

While Japanese officials have remained quiet about Korea's nuclearization, such an event will likely push the bilateral relationship to new lows. From Japan's perspective, Korea in recent years has continually gone back on its word and abrogated bilateral agreements. The legitimacy of the 1965 treaty normalizing relations was called into question under the Moon administration, which also dissolved the 2015 comfort women deal. While historical issues are beyond the scope of this article, Korea fatigue in Japan is [a real challenge](#) for Korean policymakers. Seoul's decision to withdraw from the NPT would be yet another agreement Korea signed that it reneged on, and be viewed as a betrayal of the rules-based liberal international order that has benefited both Japan and Korea. The government in Seoul should not expect to receive the same reception in Japan as India did.

As the South Korean public engages in speculation over developing its own nuclear weapon, Japanese policymakers have focused their attention on other long-standing issues in the bilateral relationship. Perhaps this demonstrates reticence to comment on a domestic issue, or a belief that Seoul will continue to be a responsible member of the international community and abide by its non-proliferation obligations. If Korea made a decision to pursue nuclear weapons, there is a chance Japan could come to terms with it as it has in Russia, China, and perhaps reluctantly in North Korea. But that decision has the potential to rupture Korea-Japan relations in a way that has not been seen before.

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