

## Miscalculations could escalate into nuclear war in NE Asia, says Gallucci

Posted on : 2024-06-04 16:28 KST Modified on : 2024-06-04 16:28 KST

The former US assistant secretary of state spoke to reporters during the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity at the end of May



Robert Gallucci, the former US assistant secretary of state, speaks to reporters at the International Convention Center Jeju on May 30, 2024. (Yonhap)

Robert Gallucci, the former US assistant secretary of state and the lead negotiator in the initial phase of North Korea's nuclear program, stressed that South Korea and the US shouldn't rely entirely on deterrence but should also seek a path to dialogue with the North. Otherwise, a miscalculation could lead to a nuclear war in Northeast Asia.

Gallucci, who was in Korea to speak at the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, told reporters at the International Convention Center Jeju in the island's city of Seogwipo on Thursday that while North Korea will never give up the nuclear weapons it has already acquired, it might agree not to develop any more. The former US official said it's important for South Korea and the US to improve relations with North Korea so as to create a more secure environment for the North.

Gallucci also noted rising suspicions that if Trump is elected president, South Korea and Japan might start moving to acquire their own nuclear arsenals within six months of the election because of weakened confidence in their American ally, while pointing out that Trump cannot arbitrarily change the US' alliances with South Korea and Japan since they're based in treaties. As for the idea of the US redeploying tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, Gallucci said that would be a "bad idea."

**Reporter: You published an article in January warning about the possibility of a nuclear war breaking out this year in Northeast Asia. Do you still see that as a possibility?**

**Gallucci:** The US emphasizes deterrence against North Korea, but deterrence can fail. Miscalculations and mistakes can be made, including those caused by AI, which could lead to a war. If North Korea remains hostile and there's escalation from language to action that leads to confrontation, which then leads to the use of force, it could ultimately lead to the use of nuclear force. That was what I was trying to warn people about with my article. I'm not predicting it will happen; I don't think it will happen, but a North Korean attack on the US mainland and Chinese involvement has a good chance of escalating. We need to find ways to prevent that from happening. I expect and hope deterrence will work, but I'm a realist and deterrence can fail, ladies and gentlemen.

**Reporter: Members of the US Congress have recently been calling for the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. What are your thoughts on that?**

**Gallucci:** Redeploying tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea wouldn't be doing anyone a favor — not South Korea, not North Korea and not the US. North Korea already has nuclear weapons. This argument [for tactical nukes] would have us put weapons ashore in Korea where they can be targeted and destroyed by North Korean nuclear weapons, which they surely would be in a contingency where they didn't want those weapons used on them. Right now, the United States extends its deterrence to the Republic of Korea through nuclear weapons that are deployed fundamentally in the continental United States and at sea in places you couldn't find. There is zero scenario in which the North Koreans can use nuclear weapons anywhere and still survive. It's a bad idea.

**Reporter: Do you think that if Donald Trump is reelected, the alliance system would be weakened and South Korea would move to acquire its own nuclear weapons?**

**Gallucci:** Many Americans, at least, think that if Donald Trump wins the election in six months the Republic of Korea will acquire its own nuclear weapons because Seoul will no longer trust that the United States will honor its alliance, and specifically its extended deterrence paradigm. That presumes something about what a second administration Trump administration would say about America's allies, what it would say specifically about the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries and what it would say about how it values particular alliances. Now, I don't want to get in the business of predicting what Donald Trump is going to say tomorrow, much less in six months or a year and six months. But I would say that he has said some things in the past to

the effect that he did not care whether some Asian allies got nuclear weapons or didn't get them. He has said that he thought the countries that rely on us in alliance should be doing more to pay for the “gifts” they're getting from the United States of America. And that he wouldn't care if they left the alliance.

The treaty alliances formal alliances like the NATO commitment the bilateral treaty with Seoul, the treaties we have with Japan, Australia and so on — these are formal treaty alliances, and I think our obligation is to honor our commitments, to recognize that we got into these alliances not because Americans are very nice people and we wanted to give a gift. We got into these alliances because they were fundamentally essential to our security and the way we regard vital interests around the world. We rely on the Republic of Korea. We rely on Japan and Australia. We rely on NATO. Do they get something out of it? Yes.



Chung-in Moon, a distinguished professor at Yonsei University, and Robert Gallucci, the former US assistant secretary of state, answer questions from reporters at the International Convention Center Jeju on May 30, 2024. (Park Min-hee/The Hankyoreh)

**Reporter:** Is North Korea's denuclearization still in the realm of possibility?

**Gallucci:** Thirty years ago, I thought I was negotiating in good faith and I thought my negotiating partner, Kang Sok-ju was negotiating in good faith. Looking back now, I may have

been a little naïve. In regard to whether the North was willing to denuclearize, the CIA was aware of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex at the time, and the negotiations were about North Korea's plutonium program. But we soon learned that North Korea had already acquired centrifuge technology from Pakistan and was secretly developing highly enriched uranium. You can't trust North Korea's commitment to denuclearization. There's no chance of Kim Jong-un giving up the nuclear weapons he already has, but he might agree not to develop any more. Incidentally, a distinction needs to be drawn between nuclear weapon states and states that have nuclear weapons. The only nuclear weapon states officially recognized by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons are the US, the UK, China, Russia and France.

**Reporter: In that case, what options are there for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue?**

**Gallucci:** North Korea's position is that they already have nuclear weapons and won't engage in any dialogue or negotiations about giving them up. If we reject those premises, negotiations aren't going to happen.

I have been an advocate that we hold two ideas in our heads at the same time: One idea is that we would like a world and a region and a peninsula free of nuclear weapons. The second idea is there are lots of things we can talk about with the DPRK apart from them giving up their nuclear weapons. We'll want to fundamentally change the relationship between Pyongyang and Seoul and Washington; only after we do that do I think we have a realistic chance of persuading the DPRK to give up nuclear weapons. It's important to consider these things from North Korea's perspective. South Korea and the US shouldn't act unilaterally.

**Reporter: It would appear that North Korea no longer values relations with South Korea or with the US and is attempting to resolve its security issues through closer relations with Russia. Do you think there's a good chance of Russia providing North Korea with cutting-edge military technology?**

**Gallucci:** Cooperation between North Korea and Russia has been striking. We won't find the Russians signing up for sanctions resolutions against North Korea anytime soon. The calculation is that there are technologies that the Russians have that, were they to share with the North Koreans, would move the North Koreans to be able to adopt those technologies much, much quicker than if they had to do it without external help. I don't know whether that's happened, but I can give you a short list of what I would be concerned about.

It starts with the design of nuclear weapons. There are things about the design of nuclear weapons that are very hard to achieve with confidence if you're not testing your nuclear weapons. And so far the North Koreans haven't tested anything. Second, there's a whole range of weapons that the North Koreans have and that the Russians have that nobody else could help them with, and we generally have three letters we use to describe those: WMD. WMD are generally regarded as weapons of mass destruction, and include nuclear weapons but also chemical weapons and biological weapons. Then, there are delivery vehicles: ballistic missiles. Ballistic missiles started with a version of the old Scud missile that the Russians did, and those are in the inventories of North Korea, Pakistan, Iran and more. Ballistic missiles have varying

ranges. The Russians are going to be very helpful there and also in designing a warhead to survive re-entry

**Reporter: There haven't been any negotiations between North Korea and the US under the Biden administration, and North Korea has greatly increased its nuclear weapon and missile capabilities. Do you think Biden will take steps to negotiate with North Korea if he's reelected?**

**Gallucci:** The US national security adviser and secretary of state have to consider costs and risks in foreign policy. But right now, the focus has been on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas invasion of Israel, the Israeli invasion of Gaza, and the possibility of a contingency over Taiwan, meaning that there's limited bandwidth, and North Korea is not the administration's first priority. I hope that in a second term, Biden will focus a bit more on North Korea. While working with South Korea, he'll need to talk about the normalization of relations, not simply yell at Pyongyang to denuclearize. Only by reassuring North Korea, can we make progress on denuclearization. That's the more realistic approach. I think engagement with North Korea comes first.

**Reporter: Seoul and Beijing recently established a diplomatic security dialogue. What kind of role can China play for the Korean Peninsula?**

**Gallucci:** The statements made by the DPRK at the end of 2023 and very early in 2024 are disturbing. Dialogue between Beijing and Seoul is a good thing. We think that Beijing could be a help and step in the right direction.

By Park Min-hee, senior staff writer

Please direct questions or comments to [[english@hani.co.kr](mailto:english@hani.co.kr)]