

Going Nuclear Would Ruin South Korea's Prosperity and Prestige

By Chung-in Moon

While there have always been some proponents of South Korea going nuclear in the face of threats from North Korea and uncertainty in Seoul about Washington's commitment to extended nuclear deterrence, recent remarks by South Korea's president have unleashed a flurry of debate and triggered popular, and growing, support in the country for the idea.

But given what's at stake for South Korea's security, economy and reputation in the world, it's the wrong path to go down, writes Chung-in Moon.

THE SPECTER OF a nuclear North Korea has haunted South Koreans for more than 30 years. Notwithstanding a series of negotiations and periods of optimism since 1994, the problem has been getting worse. Kim Jong Un declared at the Eighth Party Congress of the Korea Workers' Party (KWP) on Jan. 12, 2021, that North Korea had successfully developed tactical nuclear weapons by mastering their miniaturization and standardization. He added that it had also acquired its largest hydrogen bombs. Pyongyang has also succeeded in developing a variety of nuclear devices, ranging from simple fission bombs to boosted fission and thermonuclear bombs along with an array of ballistic and cruise missiles. It has also conducted six rounds of nuclear testing. On Sept. 8, 2022, it formally legalized its nuclear armaments and altered its nuclear doctrine to include both defensive deterrence based on "no first use" and pre-emptive strikes should its security be seriously threatened. The deployment of front-line tactical nuclear weapons was also recently unveiled.

Pyongyang's nuclear threats are no longer theoretical, then; they pose an existential threat to Seoul. Three schools of thought have emerged there to cope with these threats: extended deterrence, bargaining and the acquisition of independent nuclear arms.¹

The Options

The extended deterrence school emphasizes strengthening conventional and extended deterrence with the United States. Conventional deterrence is based on the improvement of South Korea-US combined war-fighting capabilities, an increase in the frequency and intensity of joint

¹ For a survey of these contending schools, see Chung-in Moon, "Is Nuclear Domino in Northeast Asia Real and Inevitable?" Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, October 2021, pp.10-20. apl.n.network/projects/wmd-project/is-nuclear-domino-in-northeast-asia-real-and-inevitable

² Mong-joon Chung, "In front of North Korean nuclear threat, what can we do?" blog.naver.com/globalmj/220613981473/

³ For a concise survey of this perspective, see Gui-geun Kim, "Pro and con on the new debate on deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and rationales," *Yonhap News*, Sept. 11, 2017 (in Korean).

⁴ Eun-cheol Lee, "Cho Kyung-tae's nuclear armament proposal is drawing attention," *Busan Ilbo*, July 31, 2019 (in Korean).

⁵ Chung-in Moon, "Nuclear sharing is not a thing," *Hankyoreh*, March 22, 2021, english.hani.co.kr/arti/PRINT/987761.html

⁶ *Ibid.*

military exercises, and enhancement of the "three-axis system" to deal with North Korea's nuclear and missile threat, which is composed of a kill chain for pre-emptive strikes, South Korea's missile defense system and massive punishment and retaliation. It also pays greater attention to an upgraded extended deterrence and the timely deployment of American strategic weapons to South Korea. Its proponents have been calling for South Korea's active participation in information sharing, joint planning and even joint execution of American nuclear weapons. This line of thinking, known as America's nuclear umbrella, represents the South Korean government's official position. According to this view, redeployment of tactical weapons, nuclear sharing and independent nuclear arms are not necessary as long as the credibility of America's commitment to extended deterrence is assured.

Defying the government position, however, some conservative politicians and opinion leaders have raised doubts about America's commitment. For example, Chung Mong-joon, an influential politician and the founder of the Asan Policy Institute, coined the term "torn nuclear umbrella" to describe his lack of trust in American nuclear protection.² This school reasons that the US will not sacrifice Los Angeles for Seoul. During the Donald Trump administration, wrong signals from Washington, such as the potential withdrawal of American forces from South Korea, further fueled such sentiments. While recognizing the difficulties of seeking an independent nuclear path, this camp demands the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons that were withdrawn in 1991.³ Cho Kyung-tae, a senior member of the ruling party, once threatened that "if the US refused to negotiate on the redeployment, we should withdraw from the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons] and instantly enter the development of independent nuclear weapons."⁴

Despite the pleas of some conservative party members, the US government and Congress

have strongly opposed the idea of redeploying tactical nuclear weapons not only because of their unavailability, but also because of the strategic vulnerability associated with their redeployment — such as potential pre-emptive strikes by North Korea. As the redeployment option did not work, some conservative politicians in South Korea shifted their attention to a NATO-style nuclear-sharing arrangement. During the Cold War, the US and NATO members in Europe shared nuclear intelligence and developed and executed joint nuclear plans based on mutual discussions. There was also a division of labor in which the five European countries where the US military's tactical nukes were deployed would use their own combat aircraft to drop US gravity bombs. South Korea's conservative Liberty Korea Party (now the People's Power Party), organized a forum to promote this idea of nuclear sharing, but it did not get sufficient attention from the US or the domestic audience.⁵ Strictly speaking, these nuclear capabilities are not "shared." The right to decide whether nuclear weapons would be used lies entirely with the US president; tactical nukes in Europe will not work unless the codes are entered in Washington. Moreover, achieving NATO-style co-ordination of nuclear policies requires the US Senate to ratify a "program of co-operation," according to a 1958 amendment to the Atomic Energy Act (McMahon Act). But the chances of the Senate ratifying such a program with South Korea are effectively nil.⁶

The proponents of these views know that neither redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons nor nuclear sharing are plausible, but they advance such arguments for bargaining to secure a credible US commitment to extended deterrence for South Korea. Their logic is that if the US guarantees a credible nuclear deterrence, there is no need to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons or to seek NATO-style nuclear sharing. But if the US fails to ensure extended deterrence, while refusing to agree on the redeployment and nuclear sharing, there is no choice

⁷ Quoted from Henry Sokolski, ed. "How Dark Might East Asia's Nuclear Future Be?" Nonproliferation Education Center, Working Paper 1601, Aug. 26, 2016, p. 88.

⁸ "Voices demanding nuclear armament are on the rise," *BBC News Korea*, Sept. 26, 2017 (in Korean)

⁹ Gabriela Bernal, "If the problem becomes more serious": South Korea talks going nuclear," *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, Jan 18, 2023, www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/if-problem-becomes-more-serious-south-korea-talks-going-nuclear

but to pursue an independent nuclear path. Thus, calls for redeployment and nuclear sharing can be seen as bargaining tactics.

The third school advocates an independent nuclear path in the name of nuclear sovereignty and the logic of nuclear-for-nuclear. For its proponents, nuclear weapons are the symbol of national independence and an end in itself. As one conservative politician put it, "We cannot borrow an umbrella from a neighbor every time it rains. We need to have a raincoat and wear it ourselves."⁷ He even suggested that "we should withdraw from the NPT to guard our own destiny." Some conservative opinion leaders have also argued for a pro-nuclear posture, saying that without nuclear weapons, South Koreans will become a slave of North Korean nuclear weapons, and a nuclear balance of terror is the only way to deal with North Korea.⁸

Recently, the independent nuclear path has gained public support partly due to North Korea's provocative nuclear behavior and more permissive signals from the US on South Korean nuclear armament. But most crucial were President Yoon Suk-yeol's remarks. Breaking a long-observed taboo on discussing the independent acquisition of nuclear weapons, Yoon recently said: "If the problem becomes more serious, South Korea could have tactical nuclear weapons deployed or secure its own nuclear weapons." He added that "if things turn out this way, we will be able to acquire [them] quickly thanks to our science and technological capabilities."⁹ Although he changed his stance later, saying "South Korea will abide by the NPT regime," the idea of South Korea going nuclear has been attracting public support as a result of his words.

South Korean public opinion in favor of going nuclear has varied depending on North Korea's behavior. For example, in a 2017 poll, after a barrage of missile tests and a nuclear test by Pyongyang late in 2016, those favoring going nuclear rose to 67.2 percent, while the

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¹⁰ Chung-in Moon, "Nuclear Domino," *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

¹¹ Na-ri Shin, "76.6% of South Koreans are for nuclear development," *The Donga Ilbo*, Jan. 31, 2023.

figure for opposition dwindled to 26.7 percent. But in 2018, after two inter-Korean summits reduced military tensions and heightened prospects for peace, and with preparations under way for the historic US-North Korea summit in Singapore, the public responded with a change in sentiment: Those favoring an independent nuclear force sank to 43.3 percent, those opposing it rose to 50.3 percent. Stalled inter-Korean relations since February 2019 have brought about another reversal, with those supporting the nuclear option increasing to 59.6 percent in 2019 and staying high at 56.5 percent in 2020.¹⁰ But after Yoon's recent nuclear remarks, those in support rapidly rose. A poll published by the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies and Gallop Korea on Jan. 30 showed 76.6 percent of respondents agreeing that South Korea needs to develop nuclear weapons.¹¹

Conservative politicians and civic groups have been eagerly championing Yoon's remarks as well as soaring pro-nuclear public opinion. For example, the Nuclear Self-strengthening (Haekjagang) Forum has been formally launched. On Feb. 15, the office of National Assembly lawmaker Choe Jae-hyeong and the Northeast Asia Diplomacy & Security Forum co-hosted a public event about South Korea's nuclear armament and a stronger alliance with the US at the National Assembly. In short, the taboo on advocating for independent nuclear weapons that has been in place since the days of President Park Chung Hee has been broken.

The Wrong Path

Proponents argue that the acquisition of independent nuclear weapons is essential for national security. But this argument appears flawed. The goals of national security are to ensure the survival of the state, the prosperity of the country and the prestige of the nation. But the path toward acquiring nuclear weapons could have paradoxical results, not only jeopardizing South Korea's survival and endangering

its prosperity but also severely damaging its prestige in the international community.

The case for acquiring nuclear weapons is based on the argument that America's extended deterrence is not reliable and that South Korea should counter North Korea's nuclear weapons with ones of its own. But we have more to lose than to gain from such a choice. South Korean nuclear armament would not only set off a nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula by precipitating an even more rapid build-up of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal but also increase the likelihood of a nuclear war occurring because of a misperception, miscalculation or mistake.

It would also provoke a nuclear buildup and other countermoves in China and the Russian Far East, further heightening military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. If South Korea goes nuclear while maintaining its alliance with the US, China and Russia would regard South Korea as the primary target for a nuclear strike, turning it into the front line of nuclear confrontation between the US and China/Russia. Japan has always been wary of a unified Korea armed with nuclear weapons and driven by nationalism. Thus, it is very likely to counter a nuclear South Korea with its own nuclear weapons, placing the Korean Peninsula at the center of a nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia.

The greatest risk from a South Korean nuclear program is that it could lead to a rupture in South Korea's alliance with the US. Advocates argue that the US would not strongly oppose such a program because it would have the effect of countering China, but that's a serious misunderstanding. Nonproliferation advocates have much more sway in Washington than supporters of the South Korea-US alliance, and very few believe that a nuclear-armed South Korea would be as pliable toward the US as it has been in the past. Given that American hegemony in the region has been backed by its nuclear superiority, it is very unlikely

that the US would allow Japan and South Korea to go nuclear. Therefore, the naïve expectation that South Korean nuclear armament would strengthen its alliance with the US is a fantasy. Nuclear armament would lead to a rift in the South Korea-US alliance and the deterioration of the Northeast Asia security environment, culminating in a nightmare security scenario.

Nuclear advocates often bring up the examples of India and Pakistan to argue that South Korea could withstand the sanctions and other forms of pressure that the international community might impose after a move to acquire nuclear weapons. But that's a seriously blinkered argument. As soon as South Korean enrichment or reprocessing is discovered by inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the agency would refer South Korea to the UN Security Council for a discussion of potential sanctions because it would be in outright violation of the safeguard clause of Article 3 of the NPT.

South Koreans will still vividly recall how severe was the blowback to the disclosure in 2004 that a group of nuclear scientists had enriched a small amount of uranium (0.2 grams) in an experiment, out of research curiosity. It was South Korea's friends and allies — countries such as the US and the UK — that were most vocal in their criticism at the time. Independent sanctions by the US, Japan and the EU, and particularly financial sanctions by the US, could devastate Seoul's export-oriented economy in a heartbeat. The impact would be much greater than that suffered by India and Pakistan, which had long pursued a strategy of import substitution.

One certain outcome is that the South Korean nuclear power industry would suffer a crushing blow. In contrast with India and Pakistan, South Korea's nuclear energy industry has been fully dependent on the US. Article 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 prohibits South Korea from using any nuclear materials, equipment or technology received

¹² Chung-in Moon, "Nuclear armament is a lose-lose-lose for South Korea," *Hankyoreh*, Feb. 27, 2023, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/1081423.html

from the US in military applications, including the development of nuclear weapons. If South Korea violates those rules or the IAEA's safeguard clause, it would have to immediately return all those materials and equipment to the US. Furthermore, the Nuclear Suppliers Group would stop supplying the requisite raw materials to South Korea. Clandestine nuclear weapons development would not only paralyze South Korea's nuclear power industry but also prevent it from exporting reactors for the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Since nuclear armament would also entail withdrawal from the NPT, it could seriously weaken South Korea's international image. If it were to become the first democratic state to withdraw from the NPT, it would forfeit the moral superiority over North Korea it has enjoyed internationally since the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization in 1992 and would also likely face the stigma of being a rogue state that is undermining the international nonproliferation regime. Its dream of becoming a global pivot state would be shattered.

Many nuclear armament advocates talk as if we are doomed to helpless subservience unless we choose to go nuclear, but that choice would have a fatal impact on our survival, prosperity and prestige. Doesn't Washington place more strategic value on East Asia than ever before? Hasn't it repeatedly affirmed that it will provide South Korea with extended deterrence? South Korea's and the US's combined force structure remains healthy, and there is still a path to a diplomatic solution through dialogue and negotiations. Given these circumstances, I struggle to understand why so many insist on the self-defeating approach of nuclear armament.

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