



SOUTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR OPTION

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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been on the rise since North Korea's nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. Efforts to improve the security environment on the Korean Peninsula have become more difficult after the sinking of the corvette Cheonan in March, and North Korea's artillery strike on Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010. There are indications that Pyongyang plans a third nuclear test. In a recent opinion poll a majority of South Koreans supported the idea of South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. Fears of an increased nuclear threat from Pyongyang have also caused several southern politicians to demand the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea.

South Korea's Nuclear Past

The first steps in the direction of acquiring nuclear weapons were taken by South Korea in the 1970s. However, after the United States put a stop to South Korea's attempts to buy the necessary technology from France, the government signed the UN non-proliferation treaty (NPT) in 1975. Back then nuclear weapons appeared to be the only way for the, then much weaker, South to hold the conventionally superior North Korean forces at bay.

One of the first decisions President Jimmy Carter took upon his election in 1977 was to announce the withdrawal of a majority of U.S. forces stationed in Korea. This included the removal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from the country. In the end both the troops and the nukes remained due to U.S. domestic criticism. The debate left South Korean President Park Chung-hee and his government fearful that they could be left without the military backing of the United States. The nuclear weapons program was thus restarted, in violation of the NPT, but was halted after President Park's assassination in 1979.

In the post-Park Chung-hee era, South Korea publicly renounced the idea of developing an atomic bomb. In January 1992, the two Koreas and the U.S. signed the *Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula*. As a result, all 200 U.S. nuclear weapons were withdrawn and Kim Il-Sung agreed to refrain from developing his own nuclear bomb.

In 2004, it was revealed that a government-funded research institute in South Korea had enriched uranium to a

level just below the requirement for weapons production. A diplomat described IAEA's discovery to the *Washington Post*: "In 2001, the IAEA asked to conduct a regular inspection and was denied. That happened at least twice before the South Koreans, under some protest, allowed the inspectors in two years later." In the end, an embarrassed South Korean government dismantled the facility, blaming overambitious researchers.

A Well-Armed "Threshold Nuclear State"

Despite the destruction of the test and enrichment facility, a U.S. government report from 2008 described South Korea as a "threshold nuclear state," defined as a state that has the capacity to develop and field nuclear weapons in just a couple of years.

Seoul is also in the process of renegotiating the 300 km range limit set on its ballistic missiles. This limit was set in 1979 in a bilateral agreement between South Korea and the U.S. The future limit could be extended to 800 km, covering all of North Korea as well as parts of both China and Japan. In the absence of ballistic missiles with the capacity to reach all of North Korea, the South has developed long-range cruise missiles with a range of 1500 km that can be launched from land, navy destroyers and, in the future, from submarines.

In its "Defense Reform Plan 307", issued in March 2011, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense outlined a range of steps to strengthen its defense. South Korea has also stated that nuclear propulsion is an option



for its next generation of submarines, a sign that another taboo is losing its force. This would make South Korea the only non-nuclear weapon state apart from Brazil considering fielding nuclear propelled submarines.

Calls for a Tougher Stand Against the North

A third North Korean nuclear test would heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Even if many South Koreans continue to demand dialogue, public pressure for a tougher stance against Pyongyang is mounting.

In March, an opinion poll by the Asian Institute for Policy Studies asked South Koreans if they (1) supported the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to Korea; and (2) what they thought about South Korea developing its own nuclear arsenal. An overwhelming majority supported both options.

Some conservative politicians have suggested that South Korea should again consider the nuclear option. The influential former chairman of the conservative Grand National Party Chung Mong-joon has stated: “The threat of a counter nuclear force may be the only thing that will discourage North Korea from developing its nuclear arsenal.”

Meager Benefits, High Costs

A South Korean withdrawal from the NPT would be a serious setback for the Obama administration and its stated goal of a nuclear free world. If the South decided to develop a nuclear bomb in secret, without withdrawing from the NPT, it would face the risk of discovery by the same IAEA inspectors that uncovered the nuclear enrichment facility in 2004.

The commander of the U.S. Forces Korea has stressed that he sees no practical use of stationing nuclear weapons in South Korea and that the U.S./ROK alliance provides all the deterrent the close U.S. ally needs.

Any signs of Seoul going nuclear will be met by strong opposition from China. Such a move would increase the risk of Japan or Taiwan going nuclear. Both are concerned about the rise of China and a nuclear armed North Korea.

South Korea is a member of IAEA and an exporter of civilian nuclear technology. Leaving the NPT would not only be politically costly but would also rule out deals such as the one recently struck with the United Arab Emirates, for four nuclear reactors worth US\$20 billion, and make imports of nuclear fuel for its own civilian reactors difficult.

Any steps in the nuclear direction would most likely also spur unrest at home. South Korea is a country with a vibrant, and often violent, protest culture. The recent nuclear accident in Japan has reinvigorated the Korean anti-nuclear lobby.

It is unlikely that Seoul would opt for either its own nuclear bomb or push for the return of U.S. nuclear weapons any time soon. A more likely response to a third North Korean nuclear test would be that Seoul strengthens its conventional defenses and continues its resistance to a new round of the Six-Party Talks. Even without the Six-Party talks, diplomatic options still exist. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter has recently announced that he will travel to Pyongyang, although exactly what message he will bring, if any, has not been disclosed. Nonetheless, the increasing number of South Koreans supporting the nuclear option might be used as a bargaining chip against Pyongyang in future negotiations. Whether that would be a wise course of action is another matter.

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