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South Korea: Give Nukes a Chance

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It is only a matter of time before North Korea fields an actual nuclear-tipped missile that works. With the persistent security threat from North Korea seemingly worsening, recent public opinion surveys show that a majority of South Koreans favor getting their own nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that South Korea is capable of making its own nuclear weapons, probably within a year. Indeed, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has explored this possibility occasionally since the 1970s, each time backing off under outside pressure.

Denny Roy, Senior Research Fellow at the East-West Center, argues that “An ROK nuclear weapons capability would impose a meaningful penalty on the DPRK for its nuclear weapons program.”

There are some good reasons why, in principle, the world is better off with a smaller, rather than larger, number of nuclear weapon states. Nevertheless, there are two additional principles that apply here. First, nuclear weapons are a powerful deterrent; they are the main reason why the Cold War remained cold. Second, there may be a specific circumstance in which the introduction of a new nuclear weapons capability has a constructive influence on international security—call it the exception to the general nonproliferation rule.

Given the ROK’s present circumstances, Washington and Seoul should seriously consider the following policy change. Seoul gives the required 90 days notice required for it to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which allows for de-ratification in the case of “extraordinary events” that threaten national security. The ROK announces its intention to begin working toward a nuclear weapons capability, with the following conditions: (1) the South Korean program will match North Korea’s progress step-by-step towards deploying a reliable nuclear-armed missile; and (2) Seoul will commit to halting and shelving its program if North Korea does the same. For its part, Washington announces that US nonproliferation policy is compelled to tolerate an exception when a law-abiding state is threatened by a rogue state—in this case North Korea—that has both acquired nuclear weapons and threatened to use them aggressively. Pyongyang has repeatedly spoken of using its nuclear weapons to devastate both the ROK and the United States.

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This policy change is necessary because US, ROK and (half-hearted) Chinese efforts to get North Korea to denuclearize are not working. The Kim Jong-un regime appears committed to keeping its nuclear weapons despite the incentive of improved economic and diplomatic relations offered by both Washington and Seoul. The insecure Kim regime fears absorption by South Korea and attack from the United States. Nuclear weapons equalize the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) struggling conventional forces, demand that the outside world takes it seriously, and boost the regime’s domestic legitimacy. If Kim Jong-il gave his country the Bomb, his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, who desperately needs a signature accomplishment, can hope to claim credit for a reliable nuclear missile that could change the game between the DPRK and its adversaries.

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An ROK nuclear weapons capability would impose a meaningful penalty on the DPRK for its nuclear weapons program. Aside from the sanctions ordered by the United Nations Security Council, which have proved no more than a nuisance and are amply compensated for by the growing economic relationship with China, Pyongyang has suffered no significant negative consequences for acquiring nuclear weapons. A South Korean nuclear capability would change that. The North Koreans would understand that their act brought about an outcome they very much do not want, and that to reverse this outcome they must close down their own nuclear capability.

ROK nukes, furthermore, will help deter North Korean provocations. A capacity to attack a neighbor with nuclear weapons provides North Korea with cover for limited conventional attacks. Pyongyang has established a pattern of using quick, sharp jabs against South Korea. The goal is to rattle Seoul into accommodating North Korean economic and political demands. Seoul insists that future North Korean attacks will result in military retaliation by South Korean forces. Since South Korea has not hit back after previous incidents, it is uncertain whether this pledge will deter Pyongyang from trying this tactic again. A DPRK nuclear weapons capability worsens this already dangerous situation. North Korean planners might conclude that Seoul would not dare retaliate against a DPRK strike out of fear that the next step would be a nuclear attack on the ROK. A South Korean nuclear capability, however, would redress this imbalance. If ROK conventional military capabilities are superior to the DPRK and equal or superior at the nuclear level, deterrence against a North Korean attack is stronger.

South Korean nukes would close the credibility gap in the US-ROK alliance. The “umbrella” of America’s nuclear arsenal covers South Korea and theoretically negates the DPRK nuclear threat. However, South Koreans have always questioned the reliability of this commitment which potentially puts a US city at risk in order to protect a South Korean city. The doubts are growing more acute now that a North Korean capability is apparently close to realization. An ROK nuclear arsenal would remove this strain on the alliance and give the South Koreans a sense of greater control over their own destiny.

Pyongyang would not be the only target audience for Seoul’s announcement of intent to deploy nuclear weapons. Like the North Koreans, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is deeply opposed to an ROK nuclear capability. The announcement would also signal to Beijing that the cost of failing to discipline their client state is rising dramatically. The Chinese are already debating whether the status quo of a rogue DPRK has become so adverse to Chinese interests that China must pressure Pyongyang more heavily even at the risk of causing regime collapse. South Korea’s imminent—and reversible—acquisition of nuclear weapons would strengthen the argument that the PRC must get tougher with the DPRK.

To be sure, this policy change would create its own problems. An ROK nuclear capability would pressure Japan to follow suit. A US-friendly, stable, law-abiding, liberal democratic country getting nukes is not necessarily a bad thing. But if so, the solution is for Washington and Seoul to emphasize that South Korea’s nuclear capability would be temporary and contingent, so Tokyo can remain non-nuclear. Thankfully, there are precedents for middle-sized states giving up their nuclear weapons.

South Korea’s security situation is deteriorating and for the ROK’s leadership, national security is job number one. It is now time to get past the visceral opposition to proliferation and recognize that in this case, a conditional change of South Korea’s status to nuclear-weapon state can help manage the dangers created by a heightened North Korean threat.

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