

# Talk is growing about Seoul going nuclear. But experts warn of costs involved.

North Korean threats and uncertainty about US are driving debate as South Korea seeks greater control over its defense

Chad O'Carroll July 26, 2022



The "Ivy Mike" atmospheric nuclear test in Nov. 1952 | Image: The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty's [Flickr](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Talk in South Korea about developing nuclear weapons is nothing new, and Seoul at one time even pursued a nuclear program until the U.S. [nipped it in the bud](#).

But in recent months, an assertive China and North Korea's relentless nuclear weapons development have reinvigorated discussions in Seoul about whether the country should [acquire the bomb](#), a development that experts said reflects the ROK's desire to take greater control of its own defense but which could end up compromising its own security.

A recent poll showed [more than 70%](#) of South Koreans want the bomb. Thought leaders have come out [strongly in support](#) of nuclearization. And the issue was a major topic of discussion at the [Asian Leadership Conference](#) in Seoul this month.

"Every trip I make to Korea, I sense that the debate and the openness of conversations on an independent South Korean nuclear deterrent grow louder," said Ankit Panda, a regular contributor to *NK Pro* and fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"Unofficially, these conversations are really heating up," he continued. "I think it's quite evocative that the recent Asian Leadership Conference that I attended had a full panel devoted to this idea: A panel, by the way, with no speaker presenting the case against a South Korean nuclear deterrent."

Those familiar with South Korean security affairs told *NK Pro* there are a range of reasons Seoul might pull the trigger on a nuclear weapons program, especially as Donald Trump remains a frontrunner in the 2024 presidential election. The return of an ["America First"](#) foreign policy could mean a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula — something Trump wanted to do in his first term (2017-2021).

South Korean nuclear weapons would likely “relieve the burden” of relying on U.S. extended deterrence and reduce “both abandonment and entrapment risks” from the ROK’s perspective, said Ian Bowers, an associate professor at the Royal Danish Defence College in Copenhagen.

This could “significantly enhance deterrence and provide Seoul with greater strategic autonomy both in a North Korean and regional context,” he told *NK Pro*.

Bruce Bennett, an international and defense researcher at RAND Corporation, suggested a South Korean nuclear deterrent could be more effective than a nebulous U.S. nuclear umbrella down the line.

“Consider a future 5 to 15 years from now in which North Korea might have a fairly mature nuclear posture of 200 or so nuclear weapons and 30 to 50 ICBMs,” Bennett said. “If the United States allows this North Korean fairly mature nuclear posture to develop, and then is reluctant to make serious nuclear umbrella commitments to the ROK, ROK pursuit of its own nuclear weapon capability may make sense.”

In addition, the nature of the growing DPRK tactical nuclear programs is increasingly making it difficult for South Korea to defend itself, Bowers said.

“South Korea is relying on conventional counterforce systems ... to deter and counter North Korea’s nuclear capabilities,” he explained. “This is already a challenging and operationally difficult approach.”

Chung Kuyoun, an assistant professor of political science at Kangwon National University, agreed that “the North’s nuclear threat cannot be balanced with conventional strategic assets.”



*Then-presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol visits a DMZ outpost in Dec. 2021 | Image: Yoon Suk-yeol’s presidential campaign team*

## THE COSTS

Nearly all specialists who talked to *NK Pro* emphasized the serious geopolitical costs South Korea would have to accept if it decided to develop nuclear weapons.

“Going nuclear would automatically trigger U.S. sanctions on South Korea — terminating peaceful nuclear cooperation and killing South Korean civilian nuclear exports — under the 1978 Nuclear Nonproliferation Act,” said Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies.

“Getting around those sanctions would require Seoul to undertake a massive lobbying effort with the administration and the U.S. Congress similar to the lobbying that India did for its nuclear deal under the Bush Administration,” Lewis said.



And that effort is something he believes is beyond South Korea's capabilities. Even with growing North Korean nuclear threats, Lewis told *NK Pro* that neither the White House nor Congress would consider a South Korea-only exemption for nuclear weapons.

Jina Kim, dean of the language and diplomacy division at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, agreed that the U.S. "will not tolerate" such a clear violation of the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT).

This could kill the U.S.-ROK alliance, Bennett of Rand suggested, noting Washington's threats to back out of the alliance if then-South Korean leader Park Chung Hee didn't stop his flirtation with an indigenous nuclear program in the 1970s.

Losing its long-time security backer would make South Korea more vulnerable to North Korean attacks or Chinese encroachment, Bennet said.

### **THE "LESS SAFE" OPTION?**

A South Korean nuclear program could also jeopardize Seoul's relations with others in the region, and may even push Japan — which many in the South distrust — to consider its own bomb.

And in this regard, Laura Rockwood of the Open Nuclear Network (ONN) said security risks could worsen for South Korea.

"The best argument against the ROK developing its own nuclear weapons is its own security — the ROK's acquisition of nuclear weapons would only increase the likelihood of it being targeted by more than just the DPRK," Rockwood told *NK Pro*.

"Moreover, it could increase the likelihood of other countries in the neighborhood following suit. More nuclear weapons, especially in an area of escalating conflict, is not the solution," she said.

Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said it is essential to "game out" how other players beyond North Korea would respond. "Acquiring nuclear weapons would not only antagonize China and North Korea, potentially exposing South Korea to preemptive attack, but also prompt Japan to seek nuclear weapons of its own."

Li Nan of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said a South Korean nuclear weapon program would be "unbearable" from China's perspective.

"Even if the U.S. one day acquiesces as they did to Israel, it will show to China that the U.S. cannot constrain its allies ... (and) when the states quo is broken, the rule-based international order will be like a blank paper," Nan said.

Joseph DeTrani, a former U.S. envoy to the six-party talks, said it could even trigger nations like Indonesia and possibly even Taiwan to go nuclear. "This would be the beginning of a nuclear arms race and the eventual unraveling of the NPT," he warned.



A tactical guided missile North Korea said it fired in Jan. 2022 | Image: Rodong Sinmun

A ROK nuclear program could also push Pyongyang to go even further with its own weapons development.

“Pyongyang would simply be all the more determined to enhance its nuclear arsenal,” Fitzpatrick of IISS said, rejecting the idea that a ROK nuclear deterrent would be a “bargaining chip” to induce North Korea.

Bowers of the Royal Danish Defence College said Seoul’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon would “lock in a nuclear dynamic on the Korean Peninsula that could have potentially dangerous underlying escalatory risks.”

Choosing to pursue nuclear weapons could also have short-term risks.

“The 5-10 years it might take the ROK to make this transition would be a window of vulnerability for the ROK in which North Korea would have every incentive to attack the ROK with nuclear weapons before the ROK would be prepared to respond in kind,” Bennett of RAND said.

### **‘OUR DEFENSE IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY’**

Despite the risks, nuclear weapons may be the only way for South Korea to attain greater certainty and control over its defense, some experts told *NK Pro*.

Seoul “may decide that it owes it to its own people to have its own nuclear deterrence capabilities to prevent North Korea from believing they could use its nuclear weapons to intimidate or defeat a South Korea not capable of defending itself,” said DeTrani.

Tal Inbar, head of the Space and UAV Research Center at Israel’s Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies, suggested that the costs that South Korea would pay for going nuclear may be overblown.

“We can see what the response to India and Pakistan nuclear weapons was — basically, other than rhetoric — none,” he said. Pakistan and India both tested nuclear weapons and declared themselves nuclear powers in 1998.

These precedents along with France, Israel and the U.K. suggest the U.S. may not be so eager to push Seoul away if it goes nuclear.

“We not only live smack center in a multi-polar nuclear region, but the two countries we consider our greatest threats are nuclear,” said Seokhoon Paul Choi of the Seoul-based risk consultancy Stratways Group, white noting he does not currently advocate for South Korea to nuclearize.

“While Koreans overwhelmingly support our alliance with the United States, we also believe (borrowing from the Europeans) that ‘strategic autonomy’ ... is the responsibility of all countries,” he continued. “Our defense is our responsibility.”



A North Korean soldier at the Demilitarized Zone in Jan. 2018 | Image: NK Pro

## FAST-FORWARD

Looking ahead, some experts told *NK Pro* they believed it was more likely than not that South Korea will consider going nuclear, but that it would largely depend on how North Korea’s short-range tactical nuclear weapons and other capabilities evolve.

“The lengthening or shortening of these odds will depend on how North Korea uses such a tactical capability ... and South Korea’s assessment of the strategic and economic risks and rewards that such a development would pose/provide at that time,” Bowers of the Royal Danish Defence College said.

But Bennett of Rand said larger DPRK warheads rather than tactical weapons might be what makes South Korea choose to go nuclear, as Seoul would fear the implications of North Korea’s ability to blackmail the U.S.

“(This could) undermine the U.S. nuclear umbrella much the way the Soviets undermined the U.S. nuclear umbrella in the early 1960s, leading to France leaving the NATO military alliance and building its own nuclear weapons,” he said.

DeTrani said a reluctance from the DPRK to return to talks could be the final straw for the South deciding to start a nuclear program in the next 10 years, while Rockwood saw risks from growing public pressure for ROK nuclear weapons.

If the U.S. wants to prevent all this, it needs to start paying closer attention to the issue, several experts told *NK Pro*.

“I don’t think the United States is fully recognizing the growing pressure in the ROK for developing ROK nuclear weapons,” said Bennett.

Washington could better manage South Korean threat perceptions by building on its offers to send strategic assets to the peninsula and bolster extended deterrence — items agreed in principle at the recent [Yoon-Biden summit](#) in May — said Chung of Kangwon National University.

Still, the worry is that if public support for nuclear weapons keeps growing in South Korea, the ROK may face a “Brexit” moment, said Lewis of the James Martin Center. “Like Brexit, a lot of South Korean politicians and pundits know that a nuclear-armed South Korea would be a bad idea, but they like the public benefit from embracing it,” he said.

“It is always possible that South Korean elites will collectively lose their mind.”

*Edited by Arius Derr*

Updated at 6:52 p.m. KST on July 26, 2022 to fix attribution of quotations on short-term risks for South Korea and precedents of countries acquiring nuclear weapons.

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