

# Clamour for Going Nuclear Gains Traction in South Korea

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*The nuclear issue has been simmering in South Korea for quite some time. During Park Chung-hee's regime, there was a serious move to revisit the country's nuclear option as a means of deterrence, but the US succeeded in dissuading the regime from pursuing it. However, as the North Korean threat escalated, the nuclear issue as a deterrence strategy regained focus. This coincided with the diminishing of trust on US nuclear deterrence or perception thereof. However, a policy reversal on the nuclear issue in South Korea was never easy as domestic advocates and opponents were never able to reach a consensus. Several imponderables surfaced and were debated. These include the fear of international sanctions, repercussions from the withdrawal of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), domino effect, negative impact on the South Korean economy and lack of political consensus, which came in the way of a serious rethink to pursue a nuclear path. The onus lies on the US to provide reassurance, through its extended nuclear deterrence strategy, to dissuade South Korea from entertaining nuclear thought in the future.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear race, NPT, Extended deterrence, KINU, Nuclear Consultative Group, Washington Declaration, INSS, Gallup, Domino effect.

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## INTRODUCTION

In December 2023, I wrote an article on the issue of nuclear talks in Japan and South Korea and its consequent geopolitical risks for East Asia. It was published on the website of the New Delhi-based think-tank, the Vivekananda International Foundation.<sup>1</sup> The spur to write this article stemmed from the fragile security scenario unfolding at a rapid pace because of North Korea's relentless pursuit of nuclear development and China's threat to annex Taiwan and its attempts to take full control of the South China Sea. In order to cope with this threat perception and the emerging security risks, both South Korea and Japan are beefing up their defence capabilities by increasing their defence budgets as well as acquiring more sophisticated and lethal weapons systems.

Broadly speaking, the nuclear deterrence issue is at the core of the nuclear debates in South Korea and Japan. Because of the growing nuclear arsenals of China and North Korea, regional stability has come under threat. As a result, the US has provided either nuclear assurances or nuclear protection to its allies in East Asia. This has put additional pressure on the US allies, who must navigate complex economic and political relationships with the US, China and each other.<sup>2</sup> As a fallout, US allies such as South Korea and Japan in East Asia face a difficult dilemma in attempting to manage growing 'nuclear anxiety' among their publics where opinions fluctuate swiftly in response to a sudden development of concern. In such an emerging threat environment, strategic and psychological security concerns influence policy discourse.

The issue of nuclear talks in South Korea stems from the likely abandonment fears of the US security guarantee and suspicions over credible security commitments, which has triggered the debate to develop its own nuclear weapons. There is a general perception that states such as South Korea, which are under a nuclear umbrella, experience abandonment fears, which in turn drive them to develop nuclear weapons or think on those lines. This poses additional challenge on the US as the security guarantor to strengthen reassurances for nuclear protection and save the non-proliferation regime.

A new dimension was introduced to this evolving scenario. Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea in June 2024, his first in 24 years, and the signing of a landmark treaty with North Korea that could see Moscow supply Pyongyang with advanced weapons technology has left a huge impact on the nuclear debate. This sent shockwaves throughout the region and rattled the nerves of the regional stakeholders. South Korea already had

many reasons to worry. Earlier, because of Beijing's cosiness with Pyongyang, there were talks of a China–North Korea nexus, with the former supporting the latter. Now there are talks of the development of a Russia–China–North Korea triangular relationship. That emerged as another cause for concern. Be that as it may, China may be uncomfortable with the new Russia–North Korea bonhomie but certainly not alarmed, as it can have leverage over both Russia and North Korea.

The larger focus is on the region's security and how to safeguard it, given that a development or policy response in one country can have cascading effect on other countries in the region. There could be two dreadful scenarios. First, if Beijing decides to invade Taiwan—which it considers a breakaway province and thus must be integrated into the mainland—the security situation can be dramatically altered overnight. Although the US subscribes to the One China principle, it is committed to defend Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act and would inevitably be drawn into the conflict if Beijing decides to be adventurous. Moreover, US would expect its two East Asian allies—Japan and South Korea—to join in Taiwan's defence. Therefore, it would be very difficult for both countries to remain neutral in such a situation.

The other scenario stems from the growing China–Russia–North Korea nexus following Putin's visit to North Korea in June 2024 and signing of the security treaty, which could precipitate the momentum of nuclear debate in Japan and South Korea. Both these East Asian countries might rethink about acquiring their own nuclear arsenals. If this happens, Northeast Asia would become the most nuclearised region in the world and the nuclear non-proliferation regime would almost collapse. This article examines the recent reigniting of the nuclear debate in South Korea.

### CASE OF SOUTH KOREA

South Korea is aware that its security is ensured under the US nuclear umbrella. However, there remains 'nuclear anxiety' on whether the 'extended deterrence'<sup>3</sup> assurance by the US would be enough to ensure the country's security. This anxiety has translated into increased calls for the nation to go nuclear. Does it mean the US has lost the trust of the Korean people? There are indicators that suggest to this hypothesis, as opinion polls results would reveal.

South Korea is perpetually exposed to threats from North Korea. Now it has begun to worry if it can rely exclusively on US security guarantee. Though it cannot conclusively be proved that the North Korean threat

and doubts over US security guarantee are driving the debate on whether South Korea should seek greater control over its defence, including acquiring its own nuclear arsenal, public opinions always do not endorse a view on a consistent basis. These have varied over different periods. Whatever may be the percentage of people either endorsing or opposing such an idea, any endorsement to the idea shall have heavy costs.

At one time in the past, South Korea began pursuing a nuclear programme but the US prevailed upon and halted it. In recent times, the increased threats from North Korea and China's assertiveness reinvigorated discussions in Seoul about whether the country should acquire the bomb. If Seoul chooses such a course, compromising its own security could be at stake.<sup>4</sup>

In mid-2022, an opinion poll showed that more than 70 per cent South Koreans wanted their country to acquire a nuclear weapon. A survey released by the government-funded Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) in May 2023 found that public support for a domestic nuclear arsenal declined significantly from a high of 71.3 per cent in 2021 to 69 per cent in 2022 and 60.2 per cent in June 2023.<sup>5</sup>

It transpired from the KINU survey that domestic politicisation of the issue shaped public opinion more than perceptions on North Korean threats or US credibility, leading to the decline in support for acquiring nuclear weapons. According to Sang-sin Lee, the lead author of the KINU report, despite North Korean missile provocations and considerable deterioration of relations with China, domestic support for nuclear armament relatively decreased.<sup>6</sup>

Studies in the past had revealed that South Korean people felt if their country does not possess nuclear weapons, it might face the fate like Ukraine. Yet, the KINU survey revealed that nuclear armament was not an option as the percentage of people supporting such a view decreased. This suggests that the hypothesis in favour may not be correct. Moreover, the South Korean people keep hearing so much about North Korea that they have ceased to take it seriously. The KINU survey revealed that only 34 per cent of respondents said they are interested in the topic of North Korean threat while less than one in five said developments in Pyongyang directly affect their lives.

Moreover, talks on the idea of US nuclear redeployment in South Korea scored a low. The support base declined from 61.8 per cent to 53.6 per cent over the same 2021–23 period. Of the six scenarios that the survey presented, such as if South Korea pursues a nuclear weapons programme, such as sanctions, destruction of US–South Korea alliance or deteriorated security,

only 36 per cent of respondents supported nuclear weapons when faced with these consequences. The KINU survey results starkly contrasted with other surveys that showed over 70 per cent approved nuclear armament.

Since South Korea overwhelms North Korea in terms of conventional weaponry, North Korea feels encouraged to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. Amid widening economic disparities between the two countries, North Korea has no other choice but to rely on ballistic missiles for its own defence.

Public opinions on whether South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons have fluctuated whenever a political leader speaks on the issue or a new development takes place in the region that has security implications for the country. For example, public discussion on the merits of nuclear armament picked up in South Korea since 2022, when President Yoon Suk-yeol broached the possibility, mentioning concerns about whether the US would risk a nuclear attack on its twin cities to defend Seoul in a conflict.

The issue that triggered credibility anxieties about the US commitment to defend South Korea stemmed from the thinking that, since North Korea has greatly expanded its missile development and deployment capability and threatens to nuke the US mainland, will the US automatically meet its alliance commitments and join the war and fight on two fronts—defend its own cities and South Korea? Seoul's worries could be real, given Trump's mercurial and unpredictable nature. The current nuclear debate stems from this narrative.

There are two strands of opinions in the US: some officials argue that the US will honour its commitments, while some others hold the view that the US might hesitate. Those who hold the latter view cite the example of former President John F. Kennedy, who was far more willing to make concessions to the Soviet Union during the Cuban missile crisis than was known at the time. They also cite the hesitation in the US response to Russia's military operation in Ukraine. Even the US and the NATO allies were not unanimous in their support for Ukraine for fear of Russian nuclear escalation. If the Russian threats crippled Ukraine's defence, a possible US hesitation to come to South Korea's rescue in the event of a conflict breaking out could land South Korea in a similar situation.

Such an argument could be interpreted as flawed, however. While South Korea is a treaty ally, Ukraine is not. Also, US forces are stationed in South Korean military bases, which is not the case in Ukraine. Therefore, questioning US' credibility in defending South Korea in a conflict situation might not be correct.

There can be a counterargument as well. Though the US–South Korea treaty alliance relationship has lasted for decades and has been able to contain a conventional threat, the situation after Kim Jong-un came to power has dramatically changed for the worse. Since in the new situation both the US and South Korea are potential targets of the North Korean missile attacks, doubts in South Korea have arisen on whether the US would respond in a possible Korean crisis. With China’s backing as given and the recent defence agreement with Russia following Putin’s visit, Kim Jong-un would be emboldened to be adventurous to pursue a twin attack. Because of such calculations, a growing number of South Korean people are prepared to endorse if a decision is taken by the government to acquire its own nuclear weapons as a local deterrence instead of depending on the extended deterrence provided by the US.

In August 2022, Yoon offered economic aid to North Korea in exchange for denuclearisation. Kim Jong-un’s powerful sister, Kim Yo Jong, was quick to snub, calling Yoon as ‘simple’ and ‘childish’, and his offer the ‘height of absurdity’. North Korea was not expected to barter ‘economic cooperation’ for its honour, its nukes. ‘No one barter its destiny for corn cake’, she added.

In September 2022, North Korea passed a law, making its nuclear status irreversible. Kim Jong-un reiterated that he would never surrender the weapons even if the country faced 100 years of sanctions. Pyongyang threatened to conduct its seventh nuclear test, its first since 2017, at any time. Satellite images showed that North Korea was reactivating its Punggye-ri nuclear weapons test site, indicating the possibility of another nuclear test. Whenever the US and South Korea plan their joint drills in preparation for their long-suspended field training exercise Ulchi Freedom Shield, Pyongyang raises the heat. South Korea has reason to feel threatened with the nuclear-armed trio—China, Russia and North Korea—at its doorstep. Artificial intelligence engineer Shin Changho is therefore convinced that South Korea should have nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup>

### SIGNIFICANCE OF YOON’S REMARKS

Yoon Suk-yeol’s January 2023 remarks about the nuclear issue marked the first time a South Korean President publicly broached the possibility of the country acquiring nuclear weapons due to increasing North Korean threats, since the US withdrew its nuclear weapons from the peninsula more than 30 years ago. Though it fell short of an official policy declaration, it did kick off debate about his administration’s nuclear posture and raised concerns

about Seoul's willingness to entertain an indigenous nuclear programme that could risk compromising its alliance with Washington and the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.<sup>8</sup> Yoon further said that if the US does not redeploy nuclear weapons in South Korea, it would have compelling reason to build a nuclear arsenal of its own. Though Yoon did clarify that building nuclear weapons was not yet an official policy, he stressed his current emphasis on strengthening his country's alliance with the US. Though South Korean officials were quick to walk back on Yoon's comments, there was no putting the genie back into the bottle. The truism is that South Korea has all the scientific and technological capabilities to build its indigenous nuclear weapons pretty quickly if it finally decides to do so.

At present, South Korea is a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which bans the country from seeking nuclear weapons. It also signed a joint declaration with North Korea in 1991, where both Koreas agreed not to 'test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons'. However, North Korea reneged on the agreement and conducted six nuclear tests since 2006, with a seventh possible at any moment. Since North Korea has threatened to use its nuclear arsenal against South Korea, the latter's insecurity is understandable. The very thought to develop its own nuclear weapons stems from this insecurity.

Though the US still maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea as the symbol of alliance, there are fears in South Korea about the US' capability to stop North Korea from attacking their country. There are also fears about whether the US would leave the American cities and military bases more vulnerable to a nuclear attack and come to South Korea's rescue. This fear has not dissipated.<sup>9</sup>

There is also an argument that if South Korea acquires nuclear weapons, it could force North Korea to rethink its own nuclear weapons programme and possibly prompt China to put pressure on Pyongyang to roll back its programme. However, although China might fear a regional arms race in East Asia, it is unlikely to be able to persuade Pyongyang to change its course.

If South Korea finally decides to develop indigenous nuclear arsenals, it would have to formally quit the NPT. Such a course of action could result in heavy costs for South Korea as it would inevitably attract international sanctions. In order to avoid such a possibility and reassure South Korea, the US might have to reintroduce nuclear weapons in South Korea and also forge a nuclear-sharing agreement, something similar to the one in which NATO aircraft are allowed to carry American nuclear weapons during wartime.<sup>10</sup> That would be a tough call for the US as acceding to Seoul's decision to build

nuclear weapons would not only trigger a regional arms race but also render it rudderless in putting further pressure on the North Korea to rid of its nuclear weapons. Thus, Washington faces a huge dilemma.

### PROCEDURE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE NPT

South Korea has to weigh on the consequences if it decides to pull out from the NPT. It ought to consider that all states party to the NPT have powerful interests in ensuring that its members adhere to and comply with the Treaty. Each country has a critical national and international security interest in preventing additional countries from acquiring nuclear weapons and guarding against the potentially catastrophic collapse of the non-proliferation regime and creation of new nuclear arms races. The great benefits that the NPT brings to the international community would be dangerously eroded if countries violating the Treaty felt free to withdraw from it, develop nuclear weapons and enjoy the fruits of their violation with impunity.

Withdrawing from the NPT to pursue the nuclear path would not be easy for South Korea. If the country finally decides to go nuclear, it has to give three months' advance notice for the international community to address the situation. It is clear, moreover, that the Treaty envisions that Parties will consider withdrawal only in the most serious of circumstances: those which jeopardize its supreme interests. Article X.1 of the NPT provides that

each Party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country. It shall give notice of such withdrawal to all other parties to the Treaty and to the United Nations Security Council three months in advance. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events it regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests.

The NPT conveys no power to *stop* withdrawal from taking effect if the reasons given are, in the judgement of the international community, frivolous or improper, but neither would the Treaty prevent the international community from taking appropriate steps against a withdrawing party, especially one that had demonstrated that its actions posed a threat to international peace and security. Given the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons, the possession of which is regulated by the Treaty, NPT withdrawal would ordinarily raise issues within the competence of the Security Council.

Withdrawal by a country that had already violated its NPT obligations should be of very great concern indeed.

The right to withdraw from the NPT remains a sovereign right enshrined in the Treaty itself. But nothing in the NPT gives countries the right to benefit from their violation of the Treaty's provisions or to shield themselves from the consequences of such acts. And Parties to the NPT, indeed all countries, have a sovereign right to consider the ramifications of such a withdrawal for their individual and collective security.<sup>11</sup>

Although the NPT accords sovereign rights to a member state if it decides to do so, it is always crucial to deter withdrawal as the impact of such a decision by a State can have serious consequences for international peace and security. It is important to develop preventive measures against withdrawal to send a clear message that violators will face effective measures. The international response to withdrawal should be prompt and appropriate to address the situation. Ensuring the effectiveness of measures is essential to discourage withdrawal and prevent violators from benefitting from non-compliance.<sup>12</sup>

The current nuclear debate in South Korea stems from the stressed security environment in its neighbourhood. South Korea is aware of the legal and strategic consideration if a decision to go nuclear is taken. Twenty-two years ago, on 10 January 2003, North Korea announced its unilateral withdrawal from the NPT. This decision came in the wake of a threat made a decade earlier, in 1993. This threat was frozen by diplomatic efforts to convince Pyongyang to remain a party to the NPT, which ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Since 2003, the question of the right of states to withdraw from the treaty has mobilised the international community from both political and legal perspectives. Indeed, France, in particular, has deemed this decision to be illegal and has denounced Pyongyang's unfounded use of Article X of the NPT. Paris insisted that it was unacceptable for the country to continue to use, after its withdrawal, nuclear capabilities acquired while it was a party to the regime. It highlighted that North Korea bears full responsibility for past violations even after the withdrawal. At a time when the NPT regime seems to be weakened and some states parties refer more or less explicitly to a potential withdrawal, Article X of the NPT, which contains the provision for withdrawal, has continuously come under scrutiny. The debate is particularly acute with regard to a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) edging towards near-nuclear status, and if and how such a state can legitimately renounce its commitments.

The precedent of citing North Korea regarding its withdrawal status is weak. North Korea did not technically comply with the first condition of giving three months' notice contained in Article X of the NPT. Pyongyang declared an immediate withdrawal in 2003, noting that it had already signalled its intention to withdraw from the Treaty in 1993. The ten-year moratorium cannot be formally equated with the three-month notice required under Article X. The second condition was deemed inoperative by many states, which considered that no extraordinary event had occurred between 1985 (when Pyongyang ratified the Treaty) and 2003 (when it withdrew) that affected North Korea's supreme interests. Pyongyang cited US–South Korean hostility but no actual aggression had occurred, and self-defence was not recognised by the United Nations Security Council. North Korea also pointed to the biased nature of the IAEA inspections on its territory as a justification, which cannot be considered as challenging its supreme security interests.

### NUCLEAR MURMUR LACKS SPINE

In the short term, while South Korea is not expected to resort to any hasty decision to quit the NPT, it would expect Washington to counter the North Korean threat through a joint deterrence approach. Thus, Seoul wants to put the ball in Washington's court. As a demonstration of resolve, the US held a trilateral military exercise with its two allies in East Asia—Japan and South Korea—in late June 2024 by drawing their combined capabilities to deal with a potential North Korean nuclear attack. However, Pyongyang saw this as an effort to form an Asian NATO.<sup>13</sup> Instead of sending the message of 'massive punishment and retaliation' by this exercise, Pyongyang is likely to be provoked and more belligerent in its response and would prepare itself to cope appropriately with Seoul's threat of arming itself more with powerful missiles and other conventional weapons to combat threats from North Korea.

This takes us to compare the North Korean threat that Japan and South Korea face and the intensity thereof. Any comparison between South Korea and Japan on their threat perception cannot have a common thread as the South Korean people feel North Korea's nuclear threat more strongly than Japanese people. This is because the two Koreas are contiguous, and the North is developing technologies that can get past missile-defence shields. There is a sense of crisis in South Korea that the country cannot defend itself in the current situation. Therefore, while discussions on nuclear

armament are pronounced in South Korea, it is rather muted in Japan. As the South Koreans started feeling more at ease—as demonstrated by the KINU survey results, which showed a decline in inclination to pursue the nuclear path—Putin’s visit to North Korea in June 2024, his first in 25 years, and the inking of a security deal again reignited the nuclear debate. Further, the possible Russia–China–North Korea nexus angle unnerves Seoul.

When President Yoon, after raising the nuclear issue in December 2022 back home, visited Washington in April 2023 for a summit meeting with the US President Joe Biden and to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their alliance, President Biden committed, in the Washington Declaration, enhanced nuclear cooperation and extended deterrence with a view to dissuade Seoul to pursue the nuclear path.<sup>14</sup> It was also agreed to establish a new Nuclear Consultative Group, a table-top simulation and a strategic submarine visit to South Korea. As a result, fears in Seoul were dissipated to a large extent as Biden promised Seoul a greater say in the US nuclear strategy. This could have contributed to the decline in support for nuclear armament, as revealed by the KINU survey report.

This could be one factor but it is difficult to conclusively say that the Washington Declaration did impact the nuclear attitudes of the Korean people. In a democracy, domestic political factors are more significant than foreign relations that drive changes in public opinions. Before 2022, there was no serious public discussion on nuclear armament. That led to ‘uninformed support’ for such a programme. Now the nuclear debate shifted to the mainstream, and the South Koreans were in a better position to weigh the costs and benefits. Following Biden’s reassurance, conservative support for nuclear armament became less appealing among moderate-left citizens and Democratic Party supporters. However, Putin’s visit to North Korea again triggered the nuclear debate.

In early September 2024, in a parliamentary confirmation hearing, South Korea’s defence minister nominee Kim Yong-hyun spoke favourably about the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons. He said that South Korea’s nuclear armament could be among the options considered to respond to North Korea’s nuclear threats, amid high public support for the idea of South Korea going nuclear.<sup>15</sup>

The nuclear debate was supposed to have ended after Yoon’s visit to Washington and the Washington Declaration of April 2023,<sup>16</sup> under which the US signed a major deal with its ally South Korea, recommitting the latter to its non-nuclear status in exchange for tighter US security guarantees. The

US strongly opposes the nuclearisation of any currently non-nuclear state, including its own allies.

The extended deterrence that the US provides to South Korea is intended to counter North Korea's nuclear threat on South Korea's behalf, so South Korea does not have to do so with its own nuclear weapons. This shows South Korea is expected to place immense trust in the US to come to its rescue in a potential nuclear situation. However, the ongoing nuclear interest in South Korea—as indicated in Yoon's statement, opinion surveys, view of influential think-tanks through their reports and a flurry of editorials in leading newspapers—suggests that trust on the US' extended deterrence has eroded.

Pyongyang is aware that, besides the US nuclear umbrella that Seoul enjoys, South Korea overwhelms North Korea in terms of conventional weaponry. This realisation has prodded North Korea to turn to the development of nuclear weapons. Amid widening economic disparities between the two countries, North Korea has no other choice but to rely on ballistic missiles. Thus, the inter-Korean relations continue to remain in limbo.

Talks of nuclear armament in South Korea might remain dormant for some time but could be resurrected if a new situation develops. Public opinion could swing swiftly in favour if Pyongyang goes ballistic and attacks Seoul. Such a possible scenario leads to doubt if the nuclear umbrella, though guaranteed by the US, would actually work in an emergency. The growing assertiveness of some liberal thinkers could be another factor. Such people want to strengthen their presence in the world by seeking conciliation between the two Koreas while fending off involvement from foreign countries. They think that if South Korea goes nuclear, it can conduct diplomacy on its own without speculating on Washington's potential stance.

For now, even though Seoul's stance may be muted and doubts about reliance on the US nuclear umbrella remain in some quarters, South Korea would not be in a position to arm itself with nuclear weapons. What it could be doing in the interim is to focus on advancing its technological development as close as possible to being able to deliver a nuclear capability. For example, it has successfully conducted a submarine-launched ballistic missile test. The redeeming fact is that under the Washington Declaration, South Korea and the US established the US–South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group, in which South Korea's participation in US nuclear management was aimed to help increase trust in the nuclear umbrella. Probably Biden was driven to take this initiative to stem calls in South Korea to revisit its nuclear option.

The worst-case scenario is if China decides to attack Taiwan, there is a probability that it could use tactical nuclear weapons on Taiwan's defence systems and military facilities. If Beijing pre-empts the US nuclear retaliation in response to defending Taiwan, it might not hesitate to become the second-user of nuclear weapons after the US in the pursuit of hegemony. In this possible scenario, South Korea's nuclear debate has some salience.

The way out therefore is to continue with dialogue-oriented diplomacy having security-related approaches by all the stakeholders. If North Korea is not willing to suspend its nuclear development programmes and China continues to play its Taiwan card, Japan and South Korea shall have compelling reasons to increase defence spending to build their own defence capability while remaining committed to the alliance relationship with the US. Such a course shall contribute to regional stability.

#### FALLOUT OF PUTIN'S PYONGYANG VISIT ON SEOUL

Within days after Russian President Putin concluded his North Korean visit and inked a landmark treaty with North Korea that could see Moscow supply Pyongyang with advanced weapons technology, an influential Seoul-based government-run national security think-tank, Institute for National Security and Strategy (INSS), released a strategy report, making a rare call for Seoul to diversify its options for dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, including arming itself with nuclear weapons, as it felt the US extended deterrence will not be enough to handle North Korea's evolving nuclear threats. The agreement between Putin and Kim Jong-un, with pledges of mutual defence and military assistance, sent shockwaves and stunned the region.<sup>17</sup>

The genesis of the Korean thinking is premised on the understanding that the situation before Kim Jong-un has dramatically changed. Before Kim Jong-un came to power, South Korea was convinced that its security was highly credible and believed US decision-makers, who promised that the US guarantees were 'ironclad'. Before Kim Jong-un succeeded his father Kim Jong-il, the North Korean threat to South Korea and the US regional bases were conventional and therefore at low risk. It was believed that the US commitment on the ground would be small, as the US support from air and sea would keep it limited. All these changed under the current leadership of Kim Jong-un, who is in pursuit of greater sophistication of his father's and grandfather's interests in nuclear weapons and missiles development.

North Korea conducted the first nuclear test in 2006 when Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un's father, was in charge. However, both Kim Jong-il and

his father Kim Il-sung did not build a long-range missile force and nuclear warheads. Both were aware that North Korea had technological constraints and probably hoped that the US and South Korea shall have a deal to maintain relations with North Korea in an amicable manner. However, Kim Jong-un is not restrained from such considerations, which is why nuclear and missile development programme emerged as a priority. Today, North Korea possesses intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of striking as far as the mainland United States. It also has medium-range missiles that can reach Guam, a US territory, in addition to an estimated at least 50 nuclear warheads. These nuclear-tipped ICBMs now pose a direct threat to the US mainland. This is a new development in the US–South Korea alliance. North Korea seems to be now readied to join a future Korean conflict and inflict heavy damages.<sup>18</sup>

According to the INSS report,

While continuing to strengthen South Korea-US ‘extended deterrence,’ a government level-review and strategic review of various alternatives, including deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, NATO-style nuclear sharing, nuclear self-armament and the establishment of potential nuclear capabilities, needs to take place, as does public debate over these options.<sup>19</sup>

Though discussions in the public and political spheres of re-installing US tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea or of South Korea building its own nuclear weapons have grown manifold in recent times as a response to periodic heightening of tensions, it is extremely unusual for a state-run body to broach the contentious issue.

It transpires that the geopolitical changes highlighted by ballooning nuclear anxiety influenced public demand for major policy shifts on nuclear questions in South Korea. This included strong interest in nuclear proliferation and/or the re-deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea in response to the growing nuclear threats faced by South Korea.

South Korea hosted US nuclear weapons from 1958 to 1991. The former military dictator Park Chung-hee’s administration in the 1970s embarked on a covert nuclear weapons programme, seeking to develop its own nuclear weapons, amid US military drawdown in the South, making South Koreans feel vulnerable to North Korean attacks. However, Washington forced him to abandon the programme, promising to keep its ally under its nuclear umbrella.

Since then, as threats from North Korea increased, some South Korean policymakers began advocating the possession of indigenous nuclear weapons. Subsequent opinion polls suggested that more than two-thirds of South Koreans endorsed such a view. This negatively reflects alliance dynamics and reflects Washington's untrustworthy extended deterrence and security commitments.

The report mentioned about the deployment of 'tactical nuclear weapons' with relatively low yields intended for use on the battlefield. The US maintained such weapons in South Korea until 1991 and then withdrew all of its nuclear weapons from the country as part of its global nuclear reduction efforts. Now it seems there is a call for its return. South Korea is apprehensive that, as North Korean weapons become more sophisticated, acquiring the capability to hit US targets with nuclear-tipped missiles, and following backing of Beijing and Moscow, the extended deterrence runs risks of getting irrelevant and losing its shine. Reports suggested that Russia is facing shortages of artillery shells, ballistic missiles and other weapons in its war with Ukraine and that North Korea was providing those to help Moscow. That suspicion becomes more credible after Putin's visit to Pyongyang and the conclusion of the security deal with Kim. With this development, it seems legitimate for Seoul to rethink its own defence and nuclear strategy to cope up with this emerging challenge.

The INSS report probably pre-empted an unpredictable outcome in the US presidential election in November 2024 after the maverick Donald Trump entered the race. That fear came true after Trump prevailed upon his rival Kamala Harris and emerged victorious. Trump's return to office for a second term is now being perceived by sceptics to be unpalatable to South Korea's interests. With the backdrop of Trump's outreach to the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during his first term of presidency, South Korea fears that Trump might now go back to revive his 'bromance' with Kim to cut a deal with a view to ease tensions.<sup>20</sup> However, since Kim is unlikely to yield space completely to Trump and may even convince Trump to allow him to keep some of the nuclear arsenal in place, Seoul's vulnerability would have increased manifold. Given these assumptions, it seems legitimate for South Korea to take the path it is considering with regard to the nuclear issue. In contrast to Trump, Biden stuck to his stance of remaining open to 'unconditional talks' with North Korea. Trump's mentioning North Korea as a 'nuclear power' on his inauguration day further troubled South Korea.

As the next step, Kim might be emboldened to claim his state to be recognised as a full-fledged nuclear power by major powers including China

and Russia. Coupling this with a new Russia–China–North Korea axis taking full shape, South Korea’s vulnerability would heighten manifold. With this argument, it is difficult to dismiss South Korea’s wish-list to revisit the nuclear option. Its options include either shared or domestically developed nuclear arsenal. South Korea might be tempted to go for the latter option so that it can take its own independent decision.

A day after the INSS report was released, the conservative-leaning *Chosun Ilbo* wrote an editorial, perceiving the Russia–North Korea security treaty as a ‘severe threat’ to South Korea’s security. It also observed that ‘relying solely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella has its limitations’.<sup>21</sup> It further observed: ‘This perspective is increasingly being expressed in the U.S. Congress and academia, where opinions on allowing the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons or sharing nuclear weapons in a NATO-like arrangement with South Korea are becoming more common’. It further added that discussions on the issue should no longer be taboo. It reinforces the February 2024 poll by Gallup Korea, which showed that 72.8 per cent of respondents said they were in favour of their country developing nuclear weapons. In October 2023, for instance, experts in Seoul and some US politicians endorsed the view that the US needs to redeploy 100 tactical nuclear weapons back where they had been in the past so that belligerent states like China and Russia may be kept in check.

The INSS report suggested South Korea should consider its own nuclear armament and acquire potential nuclear capabilities in light of the recent North Korea–Russia summit. The report was referring to South Korea obtaining the rights to uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel reprocessing, which are restricted under the US–South Korean Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation.

The observation in the INSS report is a compelling counter-argument to Putin’s signing of a security treaty with North Korea, thereby ‘an indirect way of accepting North Korea’s nuclear armament’. Further, by specifying cooperation on nuclear energy with a country that announced its withdrawal from the NPT on 10 January 2003, Putin tacitly acknowledged North Korea as a nuclear-armed state.

Critics might argue by citing the example of the US signing a civil nuclear agreement with India in 2008, which is not a signatory to the NPT, and that China has already accepted North Korea’s nuclear status. Therefore, Putin’s tacit acknowledgment of North Korea as a nuclear state holds ground. By signing a security treaty with North Korea, and thereby blatantly ignoring the UN Security Council’s sanctions against North Korea, Putin indirectly

recognised North Korea's nuclear status. The report feared that North Korea's status as a nuclear state will more likely become a *fait accompli* as time passes. Following the security treaty with Russia, North Korea now will be emboldened to seek the same recognition from China. However, to compare India's nuclear policy with that of North Korea would be absolutely inappropriate and flawed, as this would indicate an ignorance of the security environment in South Asia, where two hostile neighbours are living in uneasy peace for decades. Moreover, India has openly announced its No-First-Use (NFU) policy, whereas North Korea has not.

It may be further noted that comparing the security environment in South Asia with that of Northeast Asia may be a flawed argument to criticise South Korea's rethink of its nuclear policy. While in South Asia, India and Pakistan have an uneasy relationship for years, there is no direct nuclear threat from either side despite both countries possessing nuclear weapons, unlike South Korea, which faces threats from a nuclear-armed North Korea. South Korea has border links with North Korea, China and Russia, and all three are nuclear states and are governed by authoritarian regimes ruled by dictators. It is difficult to believe a democratic South Korea would feel comfortable with its security with three antagonistic nations in its neighbourhood. Notwithstanding its security alliance with the US and as its security guarantor besides providing the extended deterrence, South Korea's security worries are understandable. The political leadership in South Korea is aware of this vulnerability and is positioning itself with appropriate policy response to manage its security if a crisis develops.

The editorial further observed that, in view of the limitations of the US nuclear umbrella, opinions among US lawmakers as well as the academic community in the US are building up for 'redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons or sharing nuclear weapons in a NATO-like arrangement with South Korea'. The fact that Putin's visit to North Korea and signing of the security treaty is pushing South Korea to develop its own nuclear arms appears unstoppable. Although the prospect of a nuclear South Korea is unlikely in the near future, facing weak public endorsement and thus still a minority opinion, the discussion of nuclear armament is no longer a taboo subject in South Korea.

### PROJECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The moot point is whether South Korea can depend on the US perpetually for its security. With a leadership change in the US, South Korea finds itself

suddenly in a new situation. With Trump back in office for the second term, Seoul could fear a US policy reversal as he is likely to demand significant increase in defence cost-sharing. Under Trump presidency, there is a possibility that he may seek to freeze North Korea's nuclear programme or engage in nuclear disarmament talks rather than push for complete denuclearisation.<sup>22</sup> South Korea can have the option of negotiating with Trump to possess nuclear weapons under mutual agreement in the larger interest of US strategy in the Western Pacific. If the South Korean government inordinately delays taking a decisive decision on the issue of nuclear weapons, 'the consequences will burden future generations'. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's ill-conceived short martial law declaration and its quick revocation has plunged South Korea's domestic politics into uncertain terrain. This could put the nuclear debate in a thaw for a while but would not remain irrelevant.

Finally, the significance of the new Russia–North Korea alliance in the form of a mutual defence deal pledging protection and support in the face of 'aggression' looks pregnant with perilous consequences if either party chooses to be adventurous. If Pyongyang is emboldened by Russia's support to defend and intervene in a conflict situation, then geopolitics would have moved upside down.

In view of the fluid situation in the regional dynamics, South Korea's nuclear dilemma is likely to worsen. As a result, South Korea could see strong compelling reason to explore the nuclear path as there is no thaw in the North Korean threat. South Korea has withstood for more than a decade threats from North Korea which has repeatedly said that it would not denuclearise. Regime survival is the biggest consideration behind Kim Jong-un's stance. When North Korea faces the risk of destruction, Kim Jong-un would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons to defend his country. It transpires therefore that Kim Jong-un's 'obsession' with nuclear development is a method of defending his regime. The North Korean leader hopes to give his citizens a sense of pride and hope by expanding the country's military capability to defend in a crisis situation. As regards South Korea, it examines the US stance on Ukraine and fears that the US might hesitate to intervene in a Korean crisis despite treaty commitments and extended deterrence.

During his first presidency Donald Trump did try and reached out to have two summits with Kim Jong-un in Singapore (2018) and Hanoi (2019), but both yielded no positive outcome. At the Hanoi summit, Kim Jong-un offered to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear research and production facility in return for the lifting of all sanctions against his country, but the US was not prepared to accept the conditions. Kim Jong-un also wants the US–South

Korea joint exercises and hostile policies to be terminated forthwith. Since Kim Jong-un returned empty-handed both from Singapore and Hanoi, he feels tricked and would not like being deceived again.

This shows that negotiations with North Korea have proved to be frustratingly inconclusive, not only since Trump's efforts but for decades. If the perception that the US commitment to defend cannot be relied upon gains further ground in South Korea for the arguments made in the preceding pages, South Korea may be driven to opt for local deterrence and see this as a superior and dependable option, like India did before in its fight against Pakistan, and opt for a nuclear option. South Korea is unlikely to bother about the possible consequences when it comes to national security interests.

Thus, South Korea feels that it has compelling reasons to possess its own nuclear weapons. By choosing this option, the country would feel it can achieve a balance of power with North Korea and overcome strategic anxieties over the US security guarantee through extended deterrence. Though both South Korea and Japan come under the US' nuclear umbrella, South Korea has a reason to worry if the US would protect South Korea at the expense of its own citizens if North Korea launches ICBMs against its twin targets—Seoul and US cities such as Los Angeles and New York. The perception of the South Korean people on this is very low, as demonstrated by many opinion surveys.

If the two Koreas drift into a war, it would inevitably draw the two largest nuclear powers into the conflict. While the US will be obliged by treaty commitment to respond and defend South Korea, Russia, by its recent treaty commitment, shall be obliged to defend North Korea. In such a scenario, both Moscow and Washington would be on a collision course. South Korea is aware of such a possibility and is keen to prepare itself on its own by acquiring nuclear weapons so that a conflict is prevented. The issue of South Korea going nuclear needs to be understood from this larger geopolitical context. Such a scenario makes a compelling reason that war must be averted at all costs, leaving South Korea to take its own independent decision to go nuclear or not.

### LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The issue of South Korea going nuclear has larger ramifications. Firstly, if South Korea chooses the nuclear path, it will attract severe sanctions from the international community. There are no clear policy prescriptions in place to cope with such a situation. Secondly, it will trigger immediate domino effect

with Japan and Taiwan following suit.<sup>23</sup> As regards Japan, the issue would be more complicated as the Japanese public, rooted in the history of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would be aghast at the idea of their country choosing the nuclear path. A similar situation in Japan akin to that of South Korea could place constraints on the policymakers. The preferable priority in both the East Asian countries would be to advance disarmament education that would be relevant regionally and globally. The extended deterrence provided by the US to both the East Asian allies need to be protected and respected so that global equilibrium is not unduly disturbed. Policymakers can draw inferences from various situations discussed in the article while formulating policies for their respective countries.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the two anonymous referees for their valuable suggestions that sharpened the quality of the article.

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