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South Koreans want their own nukes but doing so risks wider war

Jeff Daniels

12-15 minutes



Jung Yeon-Je | AFP | Getty Images

A man walks past a television screen showing file footage of a North Korean missile launch, at a railway station in Seoul on April 5, 2017.

[North Korea](#) has nuclear weapons — and a majority of [South Koreans](#) support getting them too, but the consequences of doing so could be far reaching.

U.S. battlefield nuclear weapons in South Korea were removed in 1991, but since then North Korea has conducted five nuclear

tests and achieved alarming success in its ballistic missile program. Based on reports, the North has the capability to produce several dozen nuclear bombs.

"It's not really a good solution for a country like South Korea to remain non-nuclear when its neighbors are becoming nuclear and becoming quite aggressive," said Anders Corr, a former government analyst and principal at consulting firm Corr Analytics.

Polling done by Gallup Korea has shown nearly 60 percent of South Koreans would support nuclear armament, according to [Yonhap](#) news agency. The largest support is found among residents age 60 and above.

Some suggest that the opinion surveys reflect the anxiety level of some South Korean residents about what the true aims are of North Korea's [Kim Jong Un](#), an unpredictable and brutal leader known for taking risks. The 33-year-old dictator has become more forceful in threats and stepped up the regime's missile testing program even as the communist country struggles against increasing sanctions.

"Given the situation we're now facing a nuclear-armed North Korea, maybe it is time for the United States to really take a look at this option," said In-Bum Chun, a retired lieutenant general in the Republic of Korea Army and now is a visiting scholar at the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

Reintroducing tactical US nukes

"We've been saying that 'all options are on the table,' and maybe we should take a look at this in more detail," the general said. "Maybe the United States might think that this is another situation where Korea having nuclear weapons, or reintroducing tactical U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea becomes an option."

However, the retired South Korean military officer said that any discussion about Seoul getting its own nuclear weapons arsenal should first be done in Washington and should be started if it hasn't already. Also, he said the assumption must be that if the North Koreans were to get rid of their nuclear weapons, so would the South Koreans (if they had them).

"The goal is denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Chun said. "There is still hope for sanctions and other means to persuade North Korea to give up their nuclear weapons. So we need more time on this."

The U.S. currently protects the security of South Korea with nuclear weapons that can be delivered via bombers and submarines. Some have suggested that with South Korea having its own nukes it could perhaps respond faster than the U.S.

In recent months, the U.S. has demonstrated its capability to strike the North by flying B-1B Lancer bombers over the Korean Peninsula.

"The U.S. could back South Korea up with nuclear weapons but that could be a very dangerous proposition, especially if [China](#) (its closest ally) were in the war," said Corr, who has experience

in military intelligence.

North Korea orders more ICBMs

On Wednesday, North Korea's state-run KCNA news agency said its leader had ordered more intercontinental ballistic missiles. The regime test-fired two ICBMs last month, and data from the July 28 launch of a Hwasong-14 missile showed the weapon can [reach half, if not most, of the continental U.S.](#)

China's semiofficial [Global Times](#) newspaper said in an op-ed this week that Pyongyang's ongoing nuclear and missile programs "posed security threats to the Asia-Pacific region. However, a hard-line attitude or military strikes against Pyongyang would only provoke the country to take retaliatory measures."

If South Korea were to arm itself with nuclear weapons, China would likely protest and probably take the matter to the United Nations as a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which South Korea is a signatory but not North Korea.

Yet there also are concerns South Korea getting its own nukes could trigger a wider U.S.-China war because if Seoul were to use the weapons against North Korea, the regime's longtime ally Beijing might respond with an attack of its own that might include targeting U.S. military bases in South Korea or the Asia-Pacific region.

Perhaps a hint of Beijing's anger is its economic boycott against South Korea for allowing the deployment of the U.S.-supplied THAAD anti-missile shield, which China claims allows the U.S.

and South Korea to look deep into China to monitor military activities.

"I think South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons is possible, but unlikely," said James Acton, co-director of the nuclear policy program and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Seoul could face sanctions

Acton said it's understandable there's uneasiness from South Koreans watching their neighbor to the north develop nuclear weapons, but added that there's still not been a serious debate about the costs of acquiring nuclear weapons. "If there was a very serious discussion of the costs, I think you would find much less support for nuclear weapons," he said.

For instance, Acton said if South Korea were to arm itself with nuclear weapons it would be a violation of the country's international commitments, which means Seoul "would be very likely to have serious sanctions imposed on it." Also, he said the U.S. might decide to no longer offer its own security commitments to South Korea.

"The costs to South Korea of acquiring nuclear weapons are actually very, very high," said Acton. "For South Korea, a country that's become successful through international trade and engagement, the sanctions would be incredibly painful and damaging."

Back in the 1970s, South Korean President Park Chung-hee secretly began a nuclear weapons development program. Once

the U.S. learned about it, the U.S. pressured Seoul to halt the program. As was the case then, it remains U.S. policy to oppose the spread of nuclear explosives in the region.

At the same time, another option is the U.S. could redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. But doing so would violate the 1992 Seoul-Pyongyang joint agreement on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang violated its end of the agreement in 2006 when it exploded its first nuclear device under Kim Jong Il, father of the regime's current young leader.

Also, bringing back tactical weapons to South Korea could make the U.S. perhaps an even bigger target of North Korea and its communist neighbor, China. Pyongyang recently threatened to lob ballistic missiles toward U.S. military bases on the Pacific territory of Guam, which hosts the Air Force's B-1B bombers and a Navy submarine base.

Reliability of security guarantees

"For as long as U.S. security guarantees are reliable, I don't think South Korea has any need at this time for nuclear weapons," said Acton. "The U.S. has pledged to defend South Korea, including if necessary with the use of the U.S. nuclear arsenal."

That said, South Korea has "serious concerns about the reliability of those guarantees under President [Donald Trump](#)," Acton said. He said Trump has done "a lot to disrupt the U.S.-South Korean relationship — and I think it's very important that

the disruption stop."

Experts say the areas where Washington has strained the alliance include Trump's threat to terminate a ["horrible"](#) trade deal with South Korea as well as suggestions in April by the president that Seoul should pay \$1 billion for the THAAD (or Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) anti-missile defense system.

Also, Trump suggested on the presidential campaign trail that South Korea should pay more money for its own defense, even suggesting that if it doesn't he would be prepared to yank the roughly 28,000 U.S. forces stationed on the peninsula. And after he took office some allies became nervous since Trump was seen as [slow to support NATO's Article 5](#), the collective defense clause of the alliance.

"Donald Trump's statements about allies needing to pay their fair share and his hesitation about whether the United States would back up NATO's Article 5 commitment ... has all given people in South Korea greater anxiety about the American military commitment to help protect South Korea," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a Washington-based research and advocacy group

According to Kimball, the introduction of nuclear weapons into South Korea, either by the U.S. or by South Korea pursuing its own indigenous nuclear program, would have far more negative consequences than some people might otherwise think.

"It would further solidify North Korea's commitment to keep its own nuclear weapons and initiate an arms race in East Asia

involving China and South Korea that would not be necessarily stable," said Kimball. "The allure of South Korean nuclear weapons on the superficial level is understandable, but you look at the consequences and they would cause much greater insecurity for South Korea than they would provide security."