



Why the ROK-U.S. alliance must have an open debate on deploying nuclear weapons

Retired South Korean LTG In-Bum Chun weighs in on the growing debate in the South

In-Bum Chun

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It is no surprise that North Korea tested (<https://www.nknews.org/2017/09/north-korea-announces-successful-test-of-hydrogen-bomb/?c=1504425133478>) its sixth nuclear device, and in response, calls are growing in South Korea for consideration, or the actual development, of

nuclear weapons. Considering the growing threat presented by Pyongyang's development of weapons of mass destruction, this should also come as no surprise.

However, what is surprising is that this option is not being formally considered by both South Korea and the United States, all the more unusual considering U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis having mentioned that President Trump wanted a briefing on all military options. A nuclear deterrent for South Korea was, apparently, not on that list.

This is not to say that South Korea should go nuclear, but the allies should thoughtfully and thoroughly consider this option, not merely ignore it or summarily dismiss it.

There are increasing calls among the South Korean public and some politicians for South Korea to develop a nuclear weapon, or at least reintroduce U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to Korea. These calls tend to be reactive and without deep consideration of the implications of such moves.

The general public in the United States seems disinterested in the possibility of South Korea developing a nuclear weapon, and U.S. government officials tend to react in a reflexive negative manner to this topic.

This is not a healthy situation, considering the mounting North Korean threat and the responsibility of healthy democracies to engage in vibrant discussions and debates. We would be far better off if the ROK and U.S. governments engaged in a transparent discussion about these matters, ensuring that both their publics were well informed in the process.

There is an urgent need to educate the public, both Korean and U.S., on the costs and benefits of a nuclear deterrent for Korea. Right now, the Koreans who support nuclear weapons are focused on the benefits while Americans who oppose this notion are focused on the costs.

The allies should thoughtfully and thoroughly consider this option



(<https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/151102-N-ZZ999-003.jpg>)

U.S. and South Korean officials must be able to have transparent discussions about matter of serious import
- including nuclear weapons | Photo: Department of Defense

Koreans need to deeply think about whether it is in their best interests to contaminate half of the Korean peninsula even in the event of an attack by North Korea, and whether or not nuclear capabilities are needed considering the conventional capabilities available to the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Further, those Koreans concerned about Chinese reactions to the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system should consider how the Chinese would react to the U.S. redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, let alone the South fielding its own nuclear force. South Korean discussion of nuclear weapons could spark similar moves by Japan, and possibly others. This is certainly a significant concern for the United States, particularly considering its decades long investment in the nuclear nonproliferation treaty.

Despite the downsides, a serious discussion between the allies on this matter might finally awaken regional players into the dangers of a nuclear-armed North Korea that would go beyond the DPRK and give more credit to the U.S. for preventing a nuclear arms race in the region. Why should the United States and her allies be the only victim of this development?

Dialogue and consideration of the option of reintroducing of tactical nuclear weapons or a South Korean nuclear deterrent, even if leading to a decision against these courses of action, can have a strengthening effect on the alliance.

South Koreans, and others, will see that the allies have the ability to engage on such momentous issues in a responsible fashion. This can build public awareness in both countries based on

reasoned dialogue, not fears and myths. In the process, South Korean confidence in U.S. extended deterrence would likely increase.

Considering the strong viewpoints in the U.S. on such matters, and the global implications, it would be best for the United States to initiate and lead such a dialogue. This would enable the U.S. to maintain leadership on the issue: without it, this issue becomes a regional matter, and all nations neighboring China would be tempted to consider a similar deterrent. When this happens, U.S. leadership will be required more than ever.

The goal of a de-nuclearized Korean peninsula should not be given up. Once North Korean nuclear weapons are eliminated, the need for a South Korean nuclear deterrent and/or a U.S. nuclear weapons on South Korean soil would no longer be needed. As for North Korea, they should come to realize that they might have nuclear weapons, but that is all that they will have.

Edited by Oliver Hotham

Featured image: Department of Defense

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Retired Lieutenant General In-Bum Chun entered the Korea Military Academy in 1977. Chun was commissioned an infantry officer in 1981 as class 37. Chun became the youngest officer in the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army history to be an aide to a three-star general with the rank of lieutenant. From April 2015, he was the deputy

commander for the First ROK Army. Chun retired from active duty as of July of 2016, and is now a Visiting Fellow in Foreign Policy, at the Center for East Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institute.

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