

(News Focus) Growing nuclear, missile threats stir debate in U.S. over S. Korea's nuclear armament

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Growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea have stirred debate in the United States about a topic that has long been considered too nonsensical to even talk about: South Korea going nuclear.

American security experts have recently published articles making emphatic cases either for allowing Seoul to seek its own nuclear deterrent or for greater efforts to reassure the Asian ally so as to dissuade it from such a temptation.

That appears to suggest that the U.S. may be beginning to feel real concern that Seoul's nuclear option can no longer be simply dismissed as nonsense as the North keeps pushing forward with its nuclear and long-range missile programs.

"Policymakers should consider the possibility of a nuclear South Korea," Doug Bandow, a Korea expert and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said in an article contributed to the Huffington Post.

"Keeping America entangled in the Korean imbroglio as Pyongyang develops nuclear weapons is a bad option which could turn catastrophic. Blessing allied development of nuclear weapons might prove to be a better alternative," he said.

Bandow warned that Washington's "commitment to the much more populous and prosperous" South Korea likely will decline as America's finances worsen and challenges elsewhere multiply, and that Seoul could find itself ill-prepared to deter the North.

After the North's fourth nuclear test last week, some members of South Korea's ruling party called for deployment of nuclear weapons in the country. But the government dismissed the idea, saying it runs counter to the principle of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

Bandow said that public support in South Korea for a nuclear option is also on the upswing.

"Like Japan, the ROK could develop a weapon quickly if it chose to do so, perhaps in a matter of months," he said.

Bandow also compared the situation in Northeast Asia to "gun control in the U.S.: only the bad guys end up armed." China, Russia, and North Korea all have nuclear weapons while America's allies, Japan and South Korea, do not, and expect Washington to defend them, he said.

"South Korea and Japan are important international partners, but their protection is not worth creating an unnecessary existential threat to the American homeland," he said. "Indeed, the potential price of initiating nuclear war actually reduces the credibility of Washington's commitment and thus its deterrent value."

Faced with the prospect of Japanese and South Korean nuclear weapons, he also argued that China could come to see the wisdom of applying greater pressure on the North -- most importantly, cutting off energy and food shipments to the recalcitrant neighbor.

He called late former South Korean President Park Chung-hee's pursuit of nuclear weapons "prescient."

"Maybe it's time for the good guys in Northeast Asia to be armed as well," he said.

Brad Glosserman, executive director of the Pacific Forum, a program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and senior fellow David Santoro, contributed an article to the Wall Street Journal, calling for greater U.S. efforts to end "South Korea's nuclear temptation."

"South Koreans are frustrated. They feel powerless against yet another round of North Korean provocations, and their frustration has driven some mainstream politicians, with considerable public support, to champion a strategy once advanced only on the fringe: acquiring nuclear weapons," they said.

In response, nonproliferation experts and officials only trot out the usual arguments that it's a bad idea because it will hurt the country's economy, security and international status, and further entrench the nuclear problem on the peninsula and could lead Japan or Taiwan to reconsider their nuclear options.

"Yet it's pointless merely to explain why these are bad choices. South Koreans need suggestions that would relieve their mounting frustration," they said. "While no solution would be total, the only long-term remedy is the restoration of some South Korean control over matters involving their security and the diplomatic agenda."

They stressed that Seoul should be allowed to take the initiative toward addressing the North Korean problem, saying it will make South Koreans feel that they are in control, rather than dependent on U.S. and Chinese decisions.

Giving Seoul more leadership roles is the best way to quell growing calls for nuclear weapons, they said.

"U.S. strategists often mechanically seek to strengthen deterrence of adversaries like North Korea to reassure allies that they don't need their own nuclear weapons," they said.

"But a more sophisticated strategy is required, starting with a clearer understanding of why allies are tempted to begin with. Without that, U.S. allies may one day go nuclear, with South Korea leading the pack," they said.

Bennett Ramberg, a security expert, said in a column contributed to the Reuters that a South Korean decision to go nuclear would pit the country against its crucial ally, Washington, which "doggedly opposes nuclear proliferation whether by friend or foe."

He also said that bringing tactical U.S. nuclear weapons back into the South would also raise a host of additional questions, such as whether it would enhance deterrence or make Pyongyang more trigger happy, whether it would provide Seoul enough reassurance to eliminate any inclination to go nuclear and how China will react to the re-deployment.

"These open questions deserve robust public debate in the United States and South Korea," he said.