



U.S. Should Defend South Korea by Letting it Develop Nuclear Weapons

By Doug Bandow
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U.S. foreign and defense policy long has been brain dead. Whatever has been must ever be seems to be the Pentagon's mantra. That's the typical response to the idea that Washington should bring home its troops and allow South Korea to defend itself.

The Republic of Korea has grown up and surged past the North. Ahead of Pyongyang on every important measure of national power save quantity of military manpower and materiel, the ROK should use its abundant wealth and larger population to close that gap as well. Just as most Americans expect those on welfare to get a job to take care of themselves and their families.

Perhaps there are good arguments against the proposal. But I have yet to hear them. Instead, what dominates is the tyranny of the status quo.

Perhaps the best, or at least most interesting, counter is that America must baby sit the ROK lest a frightened Seoul go nuclear in response to the DPRK. In fact, Washington's conventional forces do nothing to forestall a North Korean nuclear bomb. To the contrary, by increasing Pyongyang's sense of insecurity America's treaty and garrison probably encourage the North to seek nuclear weapons.

But will the ROK believe in America's nuclear umbrella without a conventional guarantee? Washington has risked war on Seoul's behalf for six decades. If that's not enough, the problem might be the weak case for Washington to turn other nations' nuclear wars into America's nuclear wars.

If Pyongyang eventually develops a miniaturized nuclear warhead and reasonably accurate ICBM, what risks would Washington take on South Korea's behalf? Why should the U.S. turn a peripheral geopolitical problem into an existential threat?

Nonproliferation is a political sacred cow. Unfortunately, nonproliferation can cause greater problems than proliferation.

In Northeast Asia, for instance, nonproliferation has become the international equivalent of gun control: only the bad guys have guns. Russia, China, and North Korea

all are nuclear powers. So Washington is supposed to defend Japan and South Korea, at least, and maybe some other nations, such as Australia and Taiwan, from nuclear attack.

One might hope that rationality would hold in any Asian confrontation, but a number of years ago a Chinese general challenged a U.S. official: you won't risk Los Angeles for Taipei. And America's president shouldn't risk Los Angeles for Taipei—or Seoul, Tokyo, Sydney, or any other foreign city.

The alternative is to allow if not encourage Washington's allies to build countervailing nuclear weapons. The mere possibility would create a powerful incentive for the People's Republic of China to take a more active role in preventing North Korea from proceeding along the nuclear path.

Even if Pyongyang moved ahead there is no guarantee that the South and Tokyo would follow. Nevertheless, the Park Chung-hee government gave up its nuclear program only under pressure from Washington. Assemblyman and past presidential candidate Chung Mong-joon, who founded the Asan Institute, has argued that the ROK should be "given this leeway as a law-abiding member of the global community who is threatened by a nuclear rogue state."

The possibility also is periodically mooted in Tokyo. Would possession of nuclear weapons by the South and Japan be so bad for America?

More nations would have The Bomb, expanding possibilities for leakage. But the new nuclear states would be more responsible than the DPRK and more reliable than China and Russia.

Beijing, especially, would be more constrained in challenging either Japan or South Korea. Engaging in militarily provocative conduct around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, for instance, would be more risky.

A conflict between the PRC and Seoul is far less likely, but some analysts fear Chinese attempts to turn the Korean Peninsula into a modern variant of a tributary state. That outcome seems unlikely, but South Korea's possession of nuclear weapons would make it even less so. Moreover, the South no longer would be in the uncomfortable position of subcontracting out its security to Washington.

No one wants North Korea to have The Bomb. But virtually no one believes that the North will give up its atomic arsenal. If Pyongyang moves ahead, then what?

Leaving Seoul free to develop nuclear weapons might be the best way to respond the DPRK's persistent threat to turn most everything everywhere into a "lake of fire."

There are worse things than nuclear weapons spreading to responsible, democratic allies. Like leaving Pyongyang with a small state nuclear monopoly. It's time to think the unthinkable rather than enshrine the tyrannical status quo as Washington's Korea policy.

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