

# CHINA US Focus

## South Korea's Nuclear Flirtation: A Game Changer for Both China and U.S.?

Ted Galen Carpenter

February 23, 2016

While the world's attention has been focused on North Korea's recent nuclear test and satellite launch (which was a thinly disguised test for a long-range ballistic missile), important developments regarding the nuclear issue were also taking place in South Korea. If they continue, those trends could be a game changer and compel both the United States and China to confront some difficult policy choices.

North Korea has engaged in repeated and expanding forays into the area of forbidden nuclear technology in violation of several United Nations resolutions and escalating warnings to desist from its Chinese ally. Despite those egregious provocations, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) has steadfastly adhered to a nonnuclear course. Indeed, the ROK is a loyal signatory to the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

But sentiment has begun to shift in South Korea. A poll taken by the *JoongAng Ilbo* in mid-February found that 67.7 percent of respondents wanted the ROK to have its own nuclear weapons. Opponents of that position in South Korea and the United States were likely tempted to dismiss that result as merely a brief, emotional overreaction to the North Korean nuclear and missile tests.

However, U.S. officials had to take greater notice just days later when Won Yoo-Cheol stated that the time had come for his country to acquire its own nuclear weapons. Implicitly referring to the nuclear shield that the United States provides the ROK as part of the bilateral security alliance, Won emphasized: "We cannot borrow an umbrella from a neighbor every time it rains. We need to have a raincoat and wear it ourselves."

Won Yoo-Cheol is not some obscure figure. He is the floor leader for the governing party in South Korea's parliament. His endorsement of the nuclear option indicates just how seriously it has begun to penetrate the ranks of South Korea's elite.

As yet, President Park Geun-Hye has not shown any sympathy for that position. But two points should be kept in mind. First, her popularity and that of her party has been dropping in the aftermath of North Korea's most recent provocations. The temptation to embrace popular

countermeasures will rise. Second, her father, Park Chung-Hee, who ruled South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s openly flirted with acquiring an independent nuclear arsenal. Only intense U.S. pressure, combined with more tangible U.S. security assurances dissuaded him from proceeding. One has to wonder whether his views influenced his daughter.

Washington is as adamantly opposed to a South Korean nuclear deterrent now as it was four decades ago. U.S. officials fear that such a development would eliminate even the fading chance that North Korea might relinquish its nuclear program. More broadly, American policymakers worry that Japan would follow suit and become a nuclear-weapons state, and Northeast Asia would then experience a full-blown, highly destabilizing nuclear arms race. Acquisition of independent deterrents would also mean the dilution of Washington's dominance over its East Asian allies.

U.S. leaders have sought to avoid that outcome by firmly placing both South Korea and Japan under the American strategic nuclear umbrella. The growing sentiment in the ROK in favor of a national deterrent suggests that the credibility of the U.S. commitment has faded. Washington now seeks to boost that credibility by deploying a sophisticated theater missile defense system to protect the allies from attack.

The odds are still against the emergence of a nuclear-armed South Korea, but that outcome is not nearly as improbable as it once seemed. And if it does occur, it is a complete game changer. It is bizarre that the United States is still expected to treat the ROK, which has twice the population and an economy *40 times* the size of North Korea's, as a helpless protectorate. But it would be much more so to risk getting into the middle of a potential conflict between two nuclear-armed Korean states. South Korea's acquisition of a nuclear deterrent should strengthen the case, and hasten the day, for a U.S. military withdrawal from the Peninsula.

For China, the dilemma could be more acute. North Korea is a long-standing ally, but South Korea is an increasingly important economic partner. The only thing worse for China than a war on the Korean Peninsula would be a nuclear war on the Peninsula. The prospect of a nuclear-armed South Korea should create a maximum incentive on Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to cease its nuclear tests and other destabilizing actions. In addition to the growing likelihood that South Korea may respond by barging into the global nuclear weapons club, Japan might also do so, and Chinese leaders clearly do not want that outcome.

At a minimum, recent developments suggest that the patience of the South Korean people and some members of the political elite is wearing thin. South Korea has begun to flirt with the nuclear option, and if North Korea's nuclear provocations are not curbed decisively, that flirtation may turn into a full-blown relationship.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of ten books and more than 600 articles on international issues. His latest book, coauthored with Malou Innocent, is*

*Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes*  
(September 2015).