



Emerging strategic risks in the Asia-Pacific and the impact on the nuclear non- proliferation regime

The South Korean perspective

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Executive summary

South Korea's immediate security threat is North Korea. Since the beginning of 2022, North Korea has fired about 70 missiles, ranging from short-range missiles to intercontinental ballistic missiles.

South Korea's perspectives on strategic risks:

- Systemic fragmentation of the international situation is expected to continue, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is pushing the world into a second Cold War.
- At the regional level, China is becoming a risk factor, and Japan's recent change in its national security policy has intensified the arms race in Northeast Asia.
- The strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula remains unclear due to the suspension of nuclear negotiations between the United States and North Korea, the suspension of inter-Korean dialogue, and North Korea's voluntary isolation since the COVID-pandemic.

South Korea's main national security concerns:

- South Korea's immediate security threat is North Korea. Since the beginning of 2022, North Korea has fired about 70 missiles, ranging from short-range missiles to intercontinental ballistic missiles.
- North Korea is focusing on developing various types of missiles and has set up a new building on the site of the partially dismantled Punggye-ri nuclear test site, indicating efforts to restore at least some part of the site for a seventh nuclear test.

Policy changes and continuities between administrations:

- While the Moon administration focused on building an inter-Korean peace process, the new Yoon administration is expected to follow in the footsteps of previous conservative administrations and put North Korea's complete denuclearisation as the basis for improving inter-Korean relations while working toward establishing a "comprehensive strategic alliance" with the United States.

South Korea's attitude to nuclear weapons:

- Most South Koreans think North Korea's nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to South Korea, and South Koreans consistently support the development of an independent South Korean nuclear weapons capability, over the deployment of US nuclear weapons.
- Neither of these options are likely to happen in practice. The most realistic option for South Korea is to strengthen US extended deterrence while strengthening South Korea's own deterrence capability against North Korea.

Impact on the nuclear non-proliferation regime:

- The Yoon Suk-yeol government is not seriously considering developing its own nuclear weapons, or the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons by US forces in Korea. South Korea will continue to abide by nuclear non-proliferation norms. However, the Yoon government's nuclear non-proliferation stance has shown small but significant signs of change in recent months.
- If North Korea's nuclear threat becomes more visible and South Korea takes its own path to nuclear development, it will signal the start of a nuclear domino effect in Asia.

South Korea's perspectives on strategic risks

As an ally of the United States, South Korea mainly cooperates with the United States in its foreign policy, security, and military. However, economically, it relies heavily on the Chinese market.

South Korea faces many challenges in terms of strategic risks. First, the systemic fragmentation of the international situation is expected to continue due to intensifying competition among global powers, deteriorating international governance, disrupted global supply chains, as well as the weakening of institutions and norms worldwide in the aftermath of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. If systemic fragmentation continues, countries that are not great powers, such as South Korea, or are highly dependent on trade and commerce, will face various difficulties.

Second, Russia's invasion of the Ukraine is pushing the world into a second Cold War. As the Ukrainian war rapidly transforms into a confrontation between liberal democracy and authoritarian states, with US-Europe vs. China-Russia, all countries need to work towards minimising the risks of choosing a side. As an ally of the United States, South Korea mainly cooperates with the United States in its foreign policy, security, and military. However, economically, it relies heavily on the Chinese market.

Third, at the regional level, China is becoming a risk factor. As the Xi Jinping administration dismantles its Zero-COVID policy, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in China is increasing dramatically. Moreover, as the Chinese government lifted restrictions on Chinese people's overseas travel, the number of positive PCR tests for Chinese people entering South Korea also increased significantly. As South Korea tightened quarantine measures for Chinese travellers in response, China stopped issuing short-term visas to South Koreans and also suspended transit visa exemptions for both South Korean and Japanese travellers. Retaliating by economic means for diplomatic reasons is nothing new for China; for instance, when the South Korean government decided to deploy US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defence units in South Korea in 2016, China retaliated against South Korean companies. In the future, China is more likely to retaliate against small countries like South Korea than it is to do so against larger countries like the United States. If the US-China strategic competition intensifies, the likelihood of Chinese economic retaliation against South Korea will inevitably increase, as Seoul pursues its new Indo-Pacific strategy and value-led diplomacy which runs counter to Chinese interests.

Along with risks from China, Japan's recent changes in its national security policy has intensified the arms race in Northeast Asia. On 16 December 2022, the Kishida administration released three strategic documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the Mid-term Defence Build-up Program. This was the first major revision to the NSS since its release in 2013. Two key changes are noteworthy: securing the 'capability to counterattack' enemy military bases, and the doubling of the Japanese national defence budget by up to two percent of its GDP. These developments fundamentally alter Japan's 'defence only' principle, which has ruled out offensive operations since Japan's defeat in the Second World War.

Fourth, the strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula remains unclear due to three stress factors: the suspension of nuclear negotiations between the United States and North Korea; the suspension of inter-Korean dialogue; and North Korea's voluntary

isolation since the eruption of the COVID-pandemic. Meanwhile, North Korea continues to strengthen its nuclear and missile capabilities.

In addition, there is still a possibility of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region due to unresolved historical issues, territorial and maritime sovereignty issues, geopolitical factors, and geographical reasons. If, for example, China attempts to unify Taiwan by force amid the turmoil caused by the US-China strategic competition and the Ukrainian war, the entire Asia-Pacific region could face serious chaos.

South Korea's main national security concerns

A new building has been built on the site of the partially dismantled Punggye-ri nuclear test site in North Korea, indicating efforts to restore at least some part of the site for a seventh nuclear test.

South Korea's immediate security threat is North Korea. Since the beginning of 2022, North Korea has fired about 70 missiles, ranging from short-range missiles to intercontinental ballistic missiles. North Korea is focusing on developing various types of missiles, including the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile, as well as intermediate-range, short-range, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Furthermore, a new building has been built on the site of the partially dismantled Punggye-ri nuclear test site, indicating efforts to restore at least some part of the site for a seventh nuclear test.

On 2 November 2022, Pyongyang launched a ballistic missile into South Korean waters south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the East Sea, for the first time since the division of the two Koreas. In response, South Korea scrambled jets that launched missiles into waters north of the NLL. North Korea's missile provocations violated the September 19 military agreement signed at the 2018 inter-Korean summit. Why is North Korea continuing these missile provocations even though its economic situation has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

North Korea condemned the resumption of joint exercises by South Korea and the United States earlier in 2022, calling them the final stages of a war scenario meant to game out an invasion of North Korea and threatening to take 'enhanced countermeasures' against them. North Korea has criticised the South Korea-US joint military exercises in the past, but the recent response has been tougher and more aggressive. South Korea and the United States have stepped up their response to North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, including through the Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) in April, the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) in August, and a joint naval exercise involving the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, and Vigilant Storm, a joint air force exercise. Park Jong Chon, a member of the DPRK Politburo Standing Committee and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, said that North Korea would respond to the joint air force drill with a "special means of force" and that South Korea and the United States would "face a horrible outcome and pay the most terrible price."¹ The next day, North Korea fired an ICBM, believed to be a Hwasong-17, followed by a number of short-range missiles.

There is a lot of uncertainty surrounding North Korea's missile programmes and intentions, but what is apparent is that North Korea is rapidly diversifying its missile types, strengthening their survivability, while also enhancing their capacity to penetrate missile defence networks and to conduct conventional and nuclear attacks. North Korea seems to be focusing on securing nuclear deterrence against the United States through developing nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, while simultaneously developing tactical nuclear weapons. It should not be forgotten that missiles are conventional asymmetric weapons that can also be used to deliver chemical and biological payloads.

North Korea's intentions are likely twofold. The first motivation is political. Above all else, Kim Jong Un needs to show off his achievements at home and abroad to overcome the diplomatic isolation caused by the economic failure and deepening strategic competition between the United States and China during his

decade in power. Amid the current US-China competition and the crisis in Ukraine, North Korea seems to have calculated that it can develop its strategic capabilities without having to worry much about international sanctions.

The second motivation is military necessity. North Korea declared the completion of nuclear weapons in 2017, but it still has limited access to minimum nuclear deterrence against the United States. The advancement of North Korea's nuclear capability is essential to the improvement of the minimum nuclear deterrence and the reduction of conventional military capabilities with the United States. To this end, Pyongyang likely believes it is necessary to expand the production of nuclear materials (highly enriched uranium, plutonium, deuterium, and tritium) and develop tactical nuclear weapons that can be used in the battlefield, as well as large strategic nuclear warheads.

Major policy changes and continuities between the Moon and Yoon

Yoon is expected to follow in the footsteps of previous conservative administrations and put North Korea's complete denuclearisation as the basis of improving inter-Korean relations.

Regarding South Korea's policy towards North Korea, the Moon Jae-in administration attempted to establish a peace economy on the Korean Peninsula, based on a virtuous cycle of peace and economic co-prosperity. These goals reflected a functionalist approach that has been continuously pursued by progressive governments since the Kim Dae-jung administration of 1998-2003. The most outstanding feature of the Moon government's approach to North Korea was its emphasis on the importance of concluding a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. It is no exaggeration to say that the Moon government staked almost everything it had in support of its peace process on the Korean Peninsula. President Moon made diplomatic efforts towards the United States and China, as well as North Korea, to complete the declaration of the end of the Korean War within his term. However, in spite of the Moon government's efforts, the peace process on the Korean Peninsula has almost collapsed since the failure of the US-North Korea summit in Hanoi in 2018.

With the inauguration of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, significant changes are expected in South Korea's approach to both North Korea and foreign policy in general. Yoon said he would deal firmly with North Korea's illegal and unreasonable actions on principle, but would leave the door open for inter-Korean dialogue at any time. Whereas the Moon administration focused on building an inter-Korean peace process, Yoon is expected to follow in the footsteps of previous conservative administrations and put North Korea's complete denuclearisation as the basis of improving inter-Korean relations while working toward establishing a 'comprehensive strategic alliance' with the United States.

That means both deepening economic and political ties with Washington, as well as expanding that cooperation on the Korean Peninsula to address more regional and global challenges. In the latest Yoon-Biden summit, both leaders addressed key alliance issues, including the ROK-US alliance as the lynchpin for peace and prosperity; strategic, economic, and technological partnership; and comprehensive strategic alliance beyond the Korean Peninsula (such as cooperation on global issues, including Ukraine, climate change, COVID-19, cyberspace, and so on).

Regarding South Korea's North Korea policy, Yoon has emphasised that the abolition of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme is a prerequisite for all further engagement with the North, making the 'realisation of North Korea's complete denuclearisation' the top foreign and security policy priority.

The 'Audacious Initiative' that President Yoon announced in his August 15, 2022, National Liberation Day speech, implied that if North Korea takes practical denuclearisation measures, South Korea will push for a wide range of economic support and cooperation measures from the beginning. This is a more specific proposal than anything that has been discussed in the past. It front loads major measures at the beginning of the negotiations. The key is to push for the R-FEP (Resource-Food Exchange Program) on the Korean Peninsula even before comprehensive denuclearisation measures are drawn up, and to first promote cooperative projects in the areas of improving North Korea's infrastructure, people's livelihoods, and economic development.

However, it seems difficult to bring North Korea to the negotiating table with only this economic compensation-oriented initiative. North Korea's current top priority is to stabilise the regime and protect the regime through the termination of the US hostile policy. North Korea continues to demand the suspension of the US hostile policy (political, military, and economic); in other words, it is the issue of life and death for the state, not the issues facing living citizens, that remains a top priority. On the other hand, North Korea's position is that the problem of regime survival cannot be solved with economic compensation, as the five major projects of denuclearisation and openness are only secondary problems that are different from the problem of life and death.

Kim Yo Jong, sister of the North Korean leader, pointed out that: "The idea of exchanging our national core with a box of goodies such as 'economic cooperation' is really naive and childish."² Since the safety of the North Korean regime is not something that South Korea can guarantee, North Korea does not see South Korea as an equal partner, and argues that survival is a matter to be negotiated with the United States.

Another problem is that the first step toward realising this idea is that everything is possible only when North Korea responds. What seems to be lacking in the Audacious Initiative is a plan to induce North Korea's initial response. If North Korea does not respond, the Audacious Initiative will become a non-starter.

The war in the Ukraine will also have a negative impact on negotiations with North Korea. North Korea, which witnessed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is likely to feel reaffirmed in its belief that it could fall victim to outside aggression if it gives up its nuclear weapons program. In addition, North Korea appears to have learned a lesson on the use of tactical nuclear weapons from Russia, which threatened the possibility of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Recently, some speculate that North Korea has decided to provide Russia with weapons such as artillery shells and ammunitions.³ North Korea is also expected to send personnel to reconstruction projects in Donbas, eastern Ukraine. The US-China strategic competition and the crisis in Ukraine are expected to further strengthen the close relationship between the three countries – North Korea, China, and Russia.

The war in the Ukraine will also have a negative impact on negotiations with North Korea. North Korea is likely to feel reaffirmed in its belief that it could fall victim to outside aggression if it gives up its nuclear weapons program.

Factors that affect South Korea's attitude to nuclear weapons

Public surveys show that South Koreans consistently support the development of an independent South Korean nuclear weapons capability.

Most South Koreans think North Korea's nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to South Korea. Since nuclear weapons are a kind of absolute weapon, no matter how many conventional weapons South Korea has, it cannot beat nuclear weapons. Therefore, since North Korea's nuclear threat became visible, the results of public surveys on South Koreans consistently support the development of an independent South Korean nuclear weapons capability.⁴

North Korea's nuclear threat is the most influential variable in South Korean public attitudes to acquiring nuclear weapons. As nuclear and missile capabilities have been rapidly strengthened since Kim Jong Un took power, the security concerns felt by South Koreans have been rising. According to recent research, a robust majority of South Koreans support a domestic nuclear weapons program, while a smaller proportion supports the stationing of US nuclear weapons in South Korea. When asked to choose between the two, the public overwhelmingly preferred a domestic weapons program over the deployment of US nuclear weapons. The support for nuclear weapons is robust, with 71% indicating they are in favor of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons, while 56% support the deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea. However, when asked to choose between these two options, the public overwhelmingly prefers an independent arsenal (67%) over US deployment (9%). Among the majority that supports nuclear weapons acquisition, potential consequences – such as pressure from China, international economic sanctions, or US troop withdrawal – do not strongly diminish support.⁵

Currently, none of these options are likely to be realised. In order for South Korea to develop nuclear weapons on its own, it must withdraw from the NPT and suffer enormous economic losses due to the resulting international sanctions. At the same time, the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons by US forces in South Korea is virtually impossible due to US non-proliferation policies. Furthermore, deploying tactical nuclear weapons within South Korean territory poses not only the cost and risk of management and storage, but also the risk of North Korea's preemptive nuclear attack on facilities where nuclear weapons are deployed in case of contingency. Even if a nuclear sharing agreement is signed with the United States, there is a limit to how much this can fundamentally address security concerns since the United States would maintain the power to make the final decision to use nuclear weapons.

Therefore, the most realistic option for South Korea is to strengthen US extended deterrence while strengthening South Korea's own deterrence capability against North Korea. The 54th Security Consultative Meeting held in Washington in 2022, reaffirmed the United States' commitment to provide extended deterrence to the Republic of Korea by utilising all categories of military capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, missile defence, and advanced nuclear capabilities. It warned that any nuclear attack, including non-strategic nuclear weapons (tactical nuclear weapons) against the United States or its allies, would not be tolerated, which would lead to the termination of the Kim Jong Un regime. In particular, it is an important step forward to hold the annual DSC table-top-exercise, which outlines North Korea's nuclear use scenario, to cope with recent changes in its nuclear strategy and capabilities.⁶

Along with the extended deterrence, the three-pillar system that the South Korean military is developing, should be completed early. The three-pillar system is a key part of the Yoon government's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons program; it consists of Kill Chain (a system that detects and tracks North Korea's nuclear and missile launches in advance and preemptively strikes it), Korean Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) needed to defend against North Korea's attacks, and a massive retaliation (KMPR) to punish North Korea. In addition, it is important for the whole nation to unite and stand firm against North Korea's nuclear threat.

The Yoon government is trying to promote substantial nuclear sharing between South Korea and the United States in response to North Korea's nuclear threats. This includes nuclear submarines, circular deployment of carrier fleets, and regular operation of strategic assets. Crisis management on the Korean Peninsula has worsened as North Korea's aggressive nuclear doctrine lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons. Now, both countries should focus on nuclear deterrence and crisis management at the same time.

The most realistic option for South Korea is to strengthen US extended deterrence while strengthening South Korea's own deterrence capability against North Korea.

Impact on the nuclear non-proliferation regime

In light of the recent international situation, and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, the two most important challenges to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime are the Ukraine crisis and North Korea's nuclear and missile development program. First of all, if Russia uses tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, this would represent the de facto end of the NPT system, which has been maintained for more than half a century. Russia can legally possess nuclear weapons under the NPT Treaty, but one of the NPT's requirements is that countries with nuclear weapons do not use these weapons against a country that does not have them. Russia's use of nuclear weapons would be tantamount to breaking the nuclear taboo that has been maintained since the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Russian nuclear use would critically undermine the confidence in nuclear weapons states.

For South Korea, the North Korean nuclear issue is more urgent. North Korea's nuclear doctrine is evolving in an increasingly dangerous direction. At the 7th meeting of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea abolished the existing 'Self-Defense Nuclear Weapon Status Act' and announced a new law for nuclear weapon use. At the meeting, Kim Jong Un declared North Korea's established status as a nuclear power irreversible. At the same time, Kim emphasised that North Korea will enhance transparency and legitimacy when it comes to the nation's nuclear weapons policy. The law elaborated five conditions for a nuclear pre-emptive strike: when a nuclear or other weapon of mass destruction attack against North Korea has been carried out or is imminent; when a nuclear or non-nuclear strike on the leadership and national nuclear force command body has been carried out or is imminent; when a lethal military attack on important strategic targets of the state has been carried out or is imminent; when it is operationally unavoidable to prevent the expansion of a war and seize the initiative in times of contingencies; and when a situation arises that causes a catastrophic threat to the existence of the state and the safety of the people. The conditions for using nuclear weapons proposed by North Korea are not only very comprehensive, but also very arbitrary. This lowers the threshold for nuclear weapons use.

At the end of December 2022, the Sixth Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea was held, and detailed results were published in the official state newspaper Rodong Shinmun. What is particularly worrisome from South Korea's perspective is the continuation of strengthening nuclear forces and the proposal for a nuclear force and defence capability construction strategy in 2023. The evaluation of legislation on nuclear weapon was as an important achievement last year, which set out the basic direction of nuclear armament construction. There are many things to note here, including the mass production of tactical nuclear weapons, the exponential increase in nuclear weapon reserves, the adoption of another ICBM development plan, and the possibility of preemptive use of nuclear weapons. On this basis, Kim Jong Un reaffirmed the principle of 'strong-to-strong, head-on competition' against external challenges that threaten peace and safety in the region amid the accelerating trend of a new Cold War. It also defined South Korea as a 'clear enemy' and is expected to continue military provocations under the existing 'strong and head-on struggle' stance unless there is a favourable

turn of the situation this year. Therefore more attention should be paid to crisis management along with firm deterrence against North Korea.

Despite the worsening situation, the Yoon government is not seriously considering the development of its own nuclear weapons, or redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons by US forces in Korea. South Korea will continue to abide by nuclear non-proliferation norms. For South Korea, expanding the peaceful use of nuclear power is a more important task than nuclear armament. South Korea, which has maintained a solid nuclear non-proliferation stance despite the North Korean nuclear threat, will contribute to strengthening its nuclear non-proliferation regime as a global pivotal state. However, it is worth noting that the Yoon government's nuclear non-proliferation stance has shown small but significant signs of change in recent months. In addition to North Korea's aggressive nuclear doctrine, the Yoon administration's stance toward North Korea has also become tougher since several North Korean drones swept over Seoul at the end of 2022. President Yoon called for South Korean military authorities to respond 'overwhelmingly' to North Korea's provocations and has even hinted at the possibility of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons.⁷ On 11 January 2023, President Yoon said in the closing remarks of policy briefings from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense "South Korea may redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to the Republic of Korea or have our own nuclear weapons." Since then, President Yoon has taken a step back, saying, "For now, it is realistic and reasonable to respect the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the NPT system," but public support for nuclear armament has not receded. If North Korea's nuclear threat becomes more visible and South Korea takes its own path to nuclear development, it will signal the start of a nuclear domino effect in Asia.⁸ That would be the worst-case scenario and must be avoided at all costs.

If North Korea's nuclear threat becomes more visible and South Korea takes its own path to nuclear development, it will signal the start of a nuclear domino effect in Asia.

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