



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

THE SOUTH KOREAN ANTI-NUCLEAR WEAPONS MOVEMENT MUST FIND ITS VOICE

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Early next year, the United States may have a president who is no longer opposed to South Korea acquiring independent nuclear weapons. This prospect has emboldened South Korean nuclear weapons supporters. Surveys show that between 60 to 70 per cent of the South Korean population supports the acquisition of independent nuclear weapons.

One might reasonably expect that influencing the debate and seeking to change public opinion would be top priority for South Korean anti-nuclear weapons activists. This does not seem to be the case.

The International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) lists four partner organisations in South Korea. Yet, despite the South Korean nuclear issue entering mainstream conversation in recent years, these organisations and others like them, have been almost entirely silent in the “great debate” on South Korean nuclear weapons. As calls for nuclear armament grow louder, South Korean anti-nuclear activists must design strategies to change public opinion.

A sound silence?

To be sure, there are some good reasons for the anti-nuclear movement’s silence in the public debate. After all, despite comments from President Yoon where he floated the prospect of nuclear armament, the South Korean government’s official position remains that the country is a staunch supporter of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It champions denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula as a central policy goal. It has now been five decades since South Korea gave up its nuclear program, and two decades since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) identified allegedly unauthorised enrichment of uranium at a South Korean lab. It is difficult to organise rallies or candlelight vigils to hold a government accountable to a position it doesn’t officially hold.

Lack of resources is another issue. In the author's experience at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, an anti-nuclear weapons think tank in Seoul, funders in the nuclear field have shown a distinct lack of interest in supporting work on the South Korean nuclear issue. Such disinterest reflects fierce competition in a [philanthropic space that is shrinking](#), even as nuclear risks are on the rise on and around the Korean Peninsula, following North Korea and China's nuclear build-up programs, and in Europe, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The South Korean anti-nuclear movement has tended to focus on this broader picture, and on the goal of global nuclear abolition. The People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy participated in a joint statement by ninety-one civil society organisations for State Parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) urging them not to take the treaty's crucial role in preventing nuclear proliferation for granted. They have also [organised exchange seminars with Japanese nuclear abolitionists](#), and dedicated their work to the [denuclearisation of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula](#).

Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea, another organisation, is an active participant on the civil society side of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). It has attended recent Meeting of States Parties at the United Nations, alongside the Association of Korean A-Bomb Survivors, which seeks restorative justice for some of the still-living Korean victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and the genetic diseases affecting their descendants. They organise regular events such as photo exhibits to draw attention to their struggle, and in May 2023 – in an exceedingly rare win for the South Korean anti-nuclear movement – [members of the organisation met with President Yoon at the G7 Summit in Hiroshima](#).

This broad focus has meant that the movement's contributions to the national debate on nuclear weapons come from individual scholars, rather than any broad initiatives to shift public opinion against nuclear weapons.

Pro-nuclear voices are getting louder

Yet, for all the efforts of the South Korean anti-nuclear movement to push for nuclear disarmament writ large, or experts' dry pen-fighting on Korean opinion pages, there has been no significant organised effort or coordinated movement that has taken up the cause of opposing South Korea's nuclear armament or seek to significantly reverse public opinion on the issue.

Following the joint Washington Declaration between South Korea and the United States, which included an explicit non-proliferation pledge by South Korea, there was a brief pause in the domestic nuclear debate. However, the nuclear issue has now once again resurged in the country, spurred by domestic political changes in both South Korea and the United States.

Most recently, a group of twenty South Korean lawmakers, mainly from the conservative side, formed a pro-nuclear caucus. One prominent member of the group, Na Kyung-won voiced her support for independent South Korean nuclear weapons, with the caveat that nuclear acquisition must not be allowed to affect the US-ROK alliance. This position reflects a keen understanding of the position of individuals such as Elbridge Colby, who has spoken favourably about the prospect of South Korean nuclear proliferation, and who is speculated to become a key member of a future Trump administration. Colby has recently given a series of talks and interviews with South Korean media, and his words have been enthusiastically welcomed by leading proponents of South Korean nuclear weapons.

In the Korean media landscape, dominated by conservative-leaning newspapers, pro-nuclear opinions are amplified, but even progressives [have voiced cautious support](#). This is not to say that those who oppose South Korean nuclear weapons are not heard in Korean media. However, as the public opinion surveys show, their often complicated and abstract economic, legal and technical counterarguments simply do not resonate with the public. In a sense, they are preaching to the choir: [a recent survey by the Center for International and Strategic Studies](#) in Washington DC shows that a majority of Korean policy elites still oppose nuclear armament.

As for the Washington policy elite, it tends to prescribe an age-old remedy of strengthened US extended deterrence – the promise to use US nuclear weapons in the case of North Korean aggression, partly to disincentivise South Korea from acquiring its own. Robert Einhorn, former US official and expert at the Brookings Institution, has advanced this view [in South Korean media](#) as well.

Unfortunately, while extended deterrence certainly plays a role in dissuading South Korea from going nuclear, Americans who promote such views can easily be dismissed with a simple but persuasive response: “If nuclear weapons are so bad, why don’t you get rid of yours?” The US reliance on nuclear deterrence as a non-proliferation tool cannot be extended indefinitely, because even though it protects South Korea from North Korean aggression, it simultaneously [increases the salience of nuclear weapons](#) and legitimises them as the backstop of national security.

The South Korean anti-nuclear movement could – and should – respond to this question with more credibility, precisely because it has no such double-standards: it rejects all nuclear weapons, whether North Korean, American, or South Korean. Here, its focus on the big picture becomes a source of strength.

Raising the voice of the South Korean anti-nuclear weapons movement

How can the South Korean anti-nuclear movement become more visible in the national debate? I would offer a few suggestions. First, the Korean anti-nuclear movement must enhance ties to political allies, take a page out of the opposition’s playbook, and form its own anti-nuclear caucus. The newly formed Rebuilding Korea Party, a minority

progressive party, has been [more vocal about its anti-nuclear stance](#) than the Democratic Party, the major progressive force in the legislature. Despite its relatively small influence in the National Assembly, might it have what it takes to shift the national conversation and public sentiments? It has taken some steps towards this role. This week, the party exposed [pro-nuclear comments](#) of Kim Yong-hyun, the defense minister nominee, ahead of his appointment.

Partisanship can only get the movement so far, however. The largely progressive Korean anti-nuclear movement needs to expand its reach and make partners of traditional adversaries, both abroad and at home.

The Japanese anti-nuclear movement is much larger, vocal, and more well-organised than its Korean counterpart. The can build further on existing partnerships between Korean anti-nuclear civil society organisations and their Japanese counterparts will be essential to promote learning and sharing of successful strategies. They can further elevate the stories of Korean nuclear survivors.

While the movement might begin on the left, the majority of nuclear supporters in South Korea are conservative, and so the movement should build partnerships *across* the political spectrum. The Korean anti-nuclear movement could seek partners not just among adjacent movements, such as environmental organisations, but also seek allies within South Korea's influential but largely conservative Christian community. Such outreach should seek to generate the kind of opposition to nuclear weapons that enjoys support among Christians worldwide, such as within the World Council of Churches, or [the Catholic Church](#).

Given the need to find domestic sources of funding to boost its campaigns and considering the economic costs that South Korea might suffer from going nuclear, there should also be efforts to drum up support from the country's (conservative) business sector too.

To that end, the costs for South Korea of developing nuclear weapons must be made concrete. When pro-nuclear South Koreans survey respondents are informed of the costs of developing nuclear weapons, a sizeable portion of them reconsider that position. This cost should not be shared with Koreans only on sterile survey sheets. The Korean anti-nuclear movement must develop specific estimations of the cost that nuclear weapons would bring to South Korea and use those insights to craft credible messages that show how acquiring nuclear weapons would affect the everyday lives of South Korean citizens. Similarly, the economic, environmental, and social costs of nuclear storage and testing in South Korea should be studied.

Finally, to convince the South Korean public that nuclear weapons are not a solution to the acute sense of danger brought about by North Korea's nuclear weapons program,

alternative solutions to security must be explored. Here, the Korean anti-nuclear movement's existing efforts to build a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula can be made more relevant to the national debate.

In the end, a nuclear-free South Korea cannot be maintained solely through American assurances. To be sustainable, it also requires a broad – and loud! – domestic movement, that speaks the hearts and minds of the South Korean public.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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