

NO LONGER IN GOOD STANDING: HOW MONGOLIA WOULD VIEW SOUTH KOREA GOING NUCLEAR

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Mongolia's general position on the issue of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons is well known: it opposes attempts by any state to proliferate nuclear weapons, and despite the good ties between the two countries, South Korea would not be an exception. Mongolia opposes the ongoing nuclear arms race, and the weakening of the NPT regime, and promotes the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. Mongolia is the only single-state Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the world, and advocates for the establishment of a Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NEA-NWFZ).¹

Mongolia's bilateral relations with South Korea are based on the established comprehensive partnership relations and consultations on issues of mutual interest and concern. Around 50,000 Mongolians live and work in South Korea. At the same time Mongolia maintains traditional good-neighborly relations with North Korea and tries to play a role in promoting understanding and developing relations between the two Koreas.²

As a part of Northeast Asia, Mongolia tries to promote confidence-building by not only developing good-neighborly bilateral relations with all the states of the region but also promoting a regional Track 1.5 dialogue on non-traditional security issues known as the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue. The Ulaanbaatar Dialogue is complemented by the Ulaanbaatar Process, a Track 2 regional civil society dialogue that provides a venue and platform for civil society organisations of the region to cooperate for common good. Both are inclusive processes that involve representatives of both Koreas and the United States.

Mongolia does not believe that South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons would be welcomed in the region and globally. Though South Korea borders on a de facto nuclear North Korea, Mongolia would have a difficulty in supporting South Korea become a de facto nuclear-weapon state by developing its own nuclear weapons since it is a state in good standing within the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Going nuclear would only further complicate the already tense situation on the

¹ "Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status | United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones," <https://www.un.org/nwzf/content/mongolias-nuclear-weapon-free-status>.

² Sainbuyan Munkhbat, Mendee Jargalsaikhan, and Yo Batbold, "Mongolia's Balancing Act Between the Two Koreas" (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia & Mongolian Institute for Innovative Policies, 2020).

Peninsula and the region, and hurt South Korea's good standing with the NPT and the international community. Doing so would also diminish the prospect of establishing a NEA-NWFZ – a long-held Mongolian foreign policy goal.³ South Korean nuclear weapons would also make the situation critically dangerous since the two Koreas share a common border and therefore there would be almost no time for them to take serious decisions on the possible use of force or taking preventive actions thereof. The risk of the use of nuclear weapons would increase, even if not deliberately or accidentally but by miscalculation forcing both Koreas to either use or lose their weapons – a very unstable situation.

Nuclear threats and blackmails would become part of their policy toward each other, especially during South Korean election periods. The issue of Korean unification, reconciliation, or a peace agreement, would be replaced by mutual animosity, causing further political alienation between the two Koreas. It goes without saying that South Korea's nuclear armament will deal a serious, if not a fatal, blow to the NPT regime.

As for South Korea itself, going nuclear will surely entail enormous political and economic costs, including for its military and civilian nuclear industries and for broader cooperation with other industrialised states and the Global South. Nuclear weapon states and nuclear capable states, such as members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, would impose sanctions on South Korea, limiting its ability to cooperate with those countries.

Although both Koreas would be de facto nuclear weapon states, international opinion might even be *less* sympathetic to South Korean case because of its nuclear umbrella state status prior to developing its own nuclear weapons. If South Korea developed nuclear weapons while under the effective protection of the US nuclear umbrella, it might create the perception that South Korea's proliferation was not motivated by security concerns at all.

How Mongolia can respond to South Korean nuclear armament

Mongolia has limited capability, and little legal and geopolitical space to respond forcefully to South Korea's nuclear armament. Much would depend on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reaction. If UNSC sanctions South Korea Mongolia would follow the sanctions, bearing duly in mind the purpose of sanctions and bilateral relations with South Korea. Mongolia would be unlikely to impose bilateral sanctions on South Korea outside of the UNSC sanctions regime, because it has not done so with regards to North Korea.

The policy of the international community, including Mongolia, would depend to some extent on the main reasons that South Korea would provide to explain its decision of

³ Mongolia's 1998 Defence White Paper stated: "With an eye toward expanding the [nuclear weapons-free] zone, the public of Mongolia calls on their neighboring countries to declare their territories as nuclear-free and their border areas as demilitarized zones." See: "Mongolian Defense White Paper 1997/1998" (Ministry of Defense of Mongolia, 1998), 21.

going from a nuclear umbrella state to a de facto nuclear weapon state. The reasons provided must be clear and logical; states would want to understand what South Korea had done to dissuade North Korea from pursuing its nuclear weapons program, and what had been done to end the armistice or conclude a peace treaty with North Korea. It would be very important for South Korea to point out that it had not received a credible or, to use the US term, *ironclad* commitment from the United States that it would use its nuclear weapons in response to North Korean aggression or use of its nuclear weapons against South Korea.

For Mongolia to play a constructive role in the South Korean nuclear issue, it should consult proactively with South Korea on the issue and offer its role as a mediator. It could try to bring the two Koreas to discuss the situation on Korean Peninsula on a bilateral basis. South Korea's positive response to such a suggestion would show to the world that at least it was willing to reason with North Korea.

If South Korea officially indicated that it was considering leaving the NPT, Mongolia should push for the issue to be discussed at NPT Review Conference or the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a separate urgent item. However, to be practically successful that effort would need the understanding and at least indirect support of the nuclear weapon states.

In case UNSC adopts sanctions against South Korea, Mongolia would implement them as it has been implementing sanctions on North Korea. However, the implementations might be more difficult in the South Korean case due to the comparatively large number of Mongolian citizens living in South Korea and the effect on bilateral trade and other economic activities.

In sum, Mongolia remains firmly opposed to all nuclear proliferation and will undoubtedly view South Korean proliferation as a negative development not only for South Korea but for international peace and stability. However, its ability to respond constructively is dependent on a cohesive response from the international community, and particularly a unified opposition expressed by the UNSC. Mongolia's predicament thus underlines the vital importance of strengthening and sustaining the NPT at the next Review Conference in 2026.

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