



## South Korean Efforts to Counter North Korean Aggression

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Recent North Korean nuclear aggression has raised debates about how the United States should secure its interests in North-east Asia. However, any action on the peninsula should consider the security preferences of American allies, especially the Republic of Korea (ROK). With militaristic rhetoric coming from the Trump administration, the question arises of how important U.S. policy is to the actions of our Korean allies in countering North Korean (DPRK) nuclear aggression. Thus, it is important to review nuclear crises of the past and the alignment of U.S. and ROK policy toward Pyongyang. This paper reviews three periods of nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula and argues that U.S. military policy is not the sole factor determining South Korean response to DPRK nuclear provocation. South Korea's strategic culture of self-reliance drives non-nuclear diplomatic and military responses while allowing Seoul to depend on the U.S. alliance for its nuclear deterrent.

### — Background —

In July 1953, North Korea agreed to the Korean Armistice that initiated a formal cessation of hostilities between North and South Korea. Three months later, the United States and the Republic of Korea signed their own bilateral agreement. The Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) created a defense alliance that has lasted more than 60 years. In the treaty, the United States and South Korea pledged to consult each other when the security of either state is threatened (Art. II). Specifically, the two countries are to “maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack,” (Art. II), and act together to meet dangers to lawfully recognized territories (Art. III).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in Article IV of the treaty, South Korea granted the United States “the right to dispose U.S. land, air and sea forces in and about the territory of the Republic of Korea.”<sup>2</sup>

While the MDT does not directly address extended nuclear deterrence, the U.S. nuclear umbrella has been an accepted part of the alliance nearly since its inception. Since 1953, consecutive American presidents have maintained the policy of a strong U.S.-ROK alliance backed by U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.

Prior to the armistice, President Dwight Eisenhower signaled his willingness to use nuclear weapons to end the Korean Conflict. He then reiterated his resolve should China and North Korea reinitiate hostilities.<sup>3</sup> From 1958 to 1991, the United States stationed nuclear artillery, bombs, and missiles in South Korea to counter a North Korean invasion.<sup>4</sup> Further, in 1975 the Ford administration affirmed that the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons in a conflict “likely to result in defeat in any area of great importance to the United States in Asia ... including Korea.”<sup>5</sup>

It was not until 1978 at the 11th Security Consultative Mechanism (SCM) that extended nuclear deterrence was formally included in the alliance where a joint communique endorsed the continued role of “the nuclear umbrella.”<sup>6</sup> More than three decades later, the 2009 SCM continued to reaffirm this stance promising, “To provide extended deterrence for the ROK, using the full range of military capabilities, to include the U.S. nuclear umbrella.”<sup>7</sup> The 2016 establishment of the Extended Deterrence and Strategy Consultation Group, which “provides a forum for comprehensive discussions on strategic and policy issues regarding extended deterrence against North Korea” also demonstrates the growing importance of extended deterrence in the alliance.<sup>8</sup> Hence, while not initially a formal part of the mutual defense treaty, both the action and words of the alliance have confirmed America's extended nuclear commitment to South Korea.

Within the last 25 years, North Korea's nuclear actions have tested the resolve of the MDT and America's nuclear umbrella. Three crises have demonstrated the ROK's approach to dealing with a nuclear Pyongyang. The First Nuclear Crisis began in 1992 when North Korea threatened to pull out of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to develop its own nuclear weapons. This period was highlighted by eventual diplomatic alignment between the United States and South Korea, resulting in the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for alternative energy sources. The Second Nuclear Crisis, from 2003 to 2007, was characterized by increased hostility between the George W.

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Bush administration and North Korea. Pyongyang launched several ballistic missiles and tested its first nuclear bomb during this period. Finally, starting in 2008, there has been growing apprehension over North Korean nuclear weaponization in what I call the Third Nuclear Crisis. This period includes overt missile and nuclear weapons testing by North Korea countered by continued South Korean engagement and a modernized conventional deterrent.

### — Research Framework —

The U.S.-ROK alliance has been the center of increasing debate since the DPRK threatened to withdraw from the NPT. Experts have stressed that Pyongyang's nuclear program expansion presents a serious challenge to the United States and South Korea.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, U.S. defense officials have asked what a redesigned security posture in the Pacific today should look like. To answer this question, we must first understand what has worked for U.S. policy in South Korea. How has U.S. policy affected how the Republic of Korea feels about security vis-à-vis North Korea? How much influence does U.S. policy have on South Korean responses to DPRK nuclear aggression? Seeing that the Korean peninsula has a history of seeking independence in security, U.S. influence may not be what some American policymakers believe. South Korea's strategic culture of independence and pragmatism allows for both great power reliance as well as independence through indigenous security force development. So where does the South Korean strategic culture of self-reliance play into its response? Taking into account strategic culture, what effect has U.S. military policy had on ROK efforts to counter a North Korean nuclear threat?

I seek to understand how military policy regarding U.S. extended deterrence and the alliance affect this balance of autonomy and reliance. I argue that U.S. policy is not the sole factor determining South Korea's response to North Korean nuclear aggression. The hypotheses tested are as follow:

*(H1) South Korean strategic culture of self-reliance drives diplomacy in response to North Korean nuclear aggression.*

*(H2) South Korean strategic culture drives non-nuclear military responses to North Korean nuclear aggression.*

*(H3) South Korean strategic culture allows for continued dependence on the U.S. alliance for nuclear deterrence.*

Based on these hypotheses, I show that U.S. military policy has taken less of a determinant role in influencing South Korea's responses to a nuclear DPRK. I analyze ROK diplomatic and military actions compared with U.S. responses during three periods of North Korean nuclear hostility. I use artifacts of strategic culture tied to the decisions the ROK makes during these periods. Because strategic culture manifests itself through language and statements, my research is based on polls, news articles, press releases, and government reports.

First, I review ROK responses, diplomatic and militarily, from the First Nuclear Crisis of 1992 to 2003. During this period, South Korean diplomatic responses both shaped and followed U.S. policy. Its military responses took a defensive posture, though weapons development and policy suggests regional aims beyond North Korea. Secondly, I cover the period of Pyongyang's nuclear threat in what is known as the Second Nuclear Crisis. While U.S.-ROK diplomatic approaches to the

crisis were at odds during this period, South Korea maintained its military modernization in support of the alliance, taking into consideration the North Korean threat as well as regional independence. Finally, I review the growing Third Nuclear Crisis from 2008 to 2017 as North Korea actively sought to weaponize its nuclear program. During this period, South Korea openly developed a modern three-tiered conventional deterrent against North Korea.

Through all three crises, South Korea maintained a preference for engagement with North Korea, though its military development was not always focused solely on the DPRK. Aside from the diplomatic and conventional military responses, I seek to understand why the ROK has not developed a nuclear program, though it has the capability to do so. In the 1970s, Seoul sought an indigenous nuclear weapons program, but in 1975, it abandoned its designs and signed the NPT. Since then, it has relied on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, though some argue that Seoul has the potential technical capability to quickly produce its own nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup>

### — Strategic Culture Theory —

My research develops through the lens of strategic culture theory. A state's strategic culture is based on its fundamental beliefs about war and its preferences for security planning and conflict resolution.<sup>11</sup> A state's history, geography, resources, military, religion, and values all play into its decisions regarding security. Alastair Johnston defines strategic culture as a system of arguments, language, analogies, metaphors, and symbols that establish preferences for security by conceptualizing the role of the military in political affairs.<sup>12</sup> Strategic culture is what reifies the role of the military in politics for a group. Johnston measures it as a group's view on the role of war in human affairs, the nature of the threat, and the efficacy of the use of force.<sup>13</sup> Artifacts to measure strategic culture include debates, policies, speeches, media, weapon decisions, and ceremonies. The theory is not exclusive of realism's rational actor behavior, but argues that state utility calculations are influenced by culture.<sup>14</sup>

As Victor Cha explains, "As a predictive tool, strategic culture does not predetermine behavior, but shapes it, offering ideas on where the grooves are deepest and most well-trodden with regard to future behavior."<sup>15</sup> The implications are clear: by following the grooves of South Korean strategic culture, U.S. policy can maximize the efforts of the alliance, and build a unified response to the DPRK nuclear threat.

South Korean strategic culture is one of independence and self-reliance. The entire Korean peninsula has a history of conquest and colonization. Geographically located between two Asian powers – Japan to its east and China to its north and west – Korea has been a victim of 5,000 years of power competition with more than 900 invasions.<sup>16</sup> In the 20th century alone, Korea had several upheavals. It lost its sovereignty as a protectorate of Japan in 1905. By 1910, Japan had fully colonized the peninsula. When Japan was defeated in World War II, Soviet and American occupation divided Korea at the 38th parallel. Within five years, the Korean Conflict broke out backed by the Chinese in the North and the United States in the South. As Cha points out, the ROK's "push for more self-reliant defense capabilities, autonomy, and alternative military suppliers found in Korean force improvement plans are a perfectly natural response to the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era."<sup>17</sup> Constantly caught up between battling powers due to its geographic significance, South Korea has developed a culture that looks

inwards for its own security.

Notwithstanding this independent attitude, South Korea recognizes the pragmatic value of alliances and diplomacy. Cha points out that historically, order in the region is kept through great power competition or cooperation, both of which tend to exploit or exclude smaller powers like Korea.<sup>18</sup> So in order to survive and provide for its own security, Korea has historically looked to diplomacy and military alignments with great powers. Bilateral alliances with great powers was the only way to survive. Historically, China was the guarantor of that protection, though Korea's relationship with China during these periods was one of vassal or protectorate and not the alliance between two sovereign nations. Today, the United States is the great power of choice for South Korea, even though some South Koreans have manifested anti-Americanism at different times. Shin and Izatt argue, though, that anti-Americanism does not necessarily cause anti-alliance sentiments.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Haesook Chae concludes that regardless of anti-Americanism, most South Koreans prefer maintaining or even strengthening the U.S. alliance to secure against and eventually denuclearize North Korea.<sup>20</sup> Andrew O'Neil argues that faced with a security environment with possible threats from China, Japan, and especially North Korea, the ROK wants to maintain its alliance with the United States to benefit from its extended nuclear deterrent policy.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while independence is central to South Korean culture, practicality plays a role as well. This balance of independence and reliance shows that strategic culture does not negate a state's realistic tendency toward rational preference, but it does shape it.

Clearly, the South Korean strategic culture of self-reliance does not completely exclude space for alliances. Cha describes this balance of autonomy and great power dependence as "assertive bilateralism," in which South Korea seeks to develop its own security under the protection of U.S. defense.<sup>22</sup> However, independent development does not go unchecked. Cha reiterated, "If one employs a cultural interpretation, ROK behavior, while different and unsettling for the alliance, will be bounded at the extreme by its own constraints on strategic choice."<sup>23</sup> In other words, ROK pragmatism may constrain its preferences for self-reliance on the far edges of the spectrum. Indigenous nuclear weapons may be considered an extreme that is constrained by the republic's practical dependence on U.S. extended deterrence.

### — 1992-2003: The First Nuclear Crisis —

The First Nuclear Crisis began in 1992 when North Korea refused International Atomic Energy Agency special inspections and threatened to withdraw from the NPT. Then ROK President Kim Young-Sam's diplomatic response was criticized for its inconsistency.<sup>24</sup> Seeing an opening with the possible regime collapse after Kim Il-Sung's death, President Kim Young-Sam felt a hardline stance would better position the ROK for negotiations. Thus, he held that the United States and South Korea should show resolve against the DPRK and await its collapse. In response to the U.S. proposal to exchange light water reactors for North Korea's commitment to abandon its nuclear bomb program in the Basic Agreement, President Kim Young-Sam strongly opposed the negotiations as a "half-baked compromise" that "might prolong the life of the North Korean government," "send the wrong signal to its leaders" and "bring more danger and peril."<sup>25</sup>

Coming to power in 1998, President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" broke with the previous administration's

hardline approach to counter Pyongyang's nuclear development and aligned more with U.S. President Bill Clinton's diplomatic approach of negotiations without prior DPRK concessions. This sunshine policy of engaging North Korea and encouraging regional reconciliation sought to expand South Korea's regional leadership role and resulted in the inter-Korean summit in 2000. It also guided the greater regional vision promoted by Seoul's next president, Roh Moo-hyun to create South Korea as the center of regional economic and security cooperation. Both Kim and Roh carried the vision that North Korea was a key partner for regional integration and independence "rather than the main enemy to fight."<sup>26</sup>

Throughout this period, South Korean diplomatic efforts, even the hardline policies, demonstrate that ROK leadership did not see the North's nuclear program as an immediate threat to South Korean security. Andrew Pollack pointed to the lack of any spikes in noodle sales in 1994 despite North Korea's threats of war as evidence that South Koreans did not see the North's atomic threats as dangerous. Historically, "even a hint of war sent consumers rushing to stock up on dried noodles."<sup>27</sup> In the hardline Kim Young-Sam presidency, as well as the more progressive tenures of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, South Korean diplomatic responses revealed ROK voices in the alliance's approach to North Korea. Though at times this voice differed from the United States, South Korea likely followed along with U.S. diplomacy. The fear of nuclear war with Pyongyang was not high enough to risk threatening the alliance with Washington.

A large volume of literature addresses the diplomacy carried out with North Korea during the first crisis. However, less work has been done to analyze Seoul's defense activities. As the nuclear threat was benign in the eyes of the ROK, its military policy was one of defense. From a military perspective, South Korea's security initiatives demonstrated redundancy in defense systems evident of its strategic culture of self-reliance. While South Korea did not seek its own nuclear weapons, it did expand its conventional military capabilities – some directed at North Korea and others directed at establishing an autonomous defense force. On the surface, ROK policy could be seen as following U.S. policy. However, upon closer examination, there is evidence these South Korean efforts were actually stemming from a preference for self-reliance.

Seoul demonstrated independence in its military response toward the DPRK during this period. At the beginning of the crisis, the 1993-1994 ROK Defense White Paper, principally focused on North Korea. It stated, "Our most important tasks today are to prepare for the existing threat from the North and to strengthen our self-reliant defense capabilities."<sup>28</sup> Further, it explained, "Faced with a North Korean military threat, our armed forces are making their utmost effort to establish a solid military deterrence posture. At the same time, in preparation for the strategic environment that will come in the 21st century, we are carrying out future oriented defense policies aimed at solidifying our self-reliant defense capability to protect our national interests."<sup>29</sup> Thus, during the Kim Young-Sam years, the ROK military policy was one of defense against the DPRK, while moving toward greater defense autonomy in the future.

The ROK's focus on a defensive posture was exemplified in its response to U.S. plans for a limited surgical strike on North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility in 1994. President Kim argued against such an attack calling President Clinton to say that an airstrike would "immediately prompt North Korea to open fire against major South Korean cities from the border."<sup>30</sup>

Further, in March 1994, South Korea announced it would

introduce Patriot anti-ballistic missile batteries as defense against North Korean missiles.<sup>31</sup> These examples demonstrate a military policy that opposed offensive actions and favored a defensive posture with respect to North Korea. Such a policy was likely a combination of the ROK not seeing the North Korean nuclear program as an immediate threat and fear of escalation from limited offensive strikes to full-scale war. Moreover, the response shows that U.S. policy did not drive a military response. Instead, South Korea's military response was determined by Seoul.

ROK military policy during the crisis gradually expanded beyond North Korea to regional military independence. The 1997-1998 ROK Defense White Paper provided nuanced changes to its 1993-1994 version. Its objectives were updated to defend the nation "not only from the military threats of North Korea, but also from all kinds of external military threats."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, while it identified the ROK-U.S. alliance as the "mainstay of Korea's defense system," it also set an objective to achieve a regional advanced defense force built on the "realization of a self-reliant defense posture" and modern weapons systems.<sup>33</sup> Its air force and navy modernization during the 1990s exemplifies this desire for an autonomous capability.

Korea's plans to modernize its air force during this period demonstrate a preference for autonomy in defense. In November 1997, Seoul announced its F-X program to create an indigenous air superiority and deep strike capable aircraft. While deep strike ability could act as a deterrent to a North Korean nuclear strike, the program could also "turn the Republic of Korea into a regional power within 20 years, with a view to holding its own on the geopolitical scene after any reunification."<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the ROK Air Force identified strategic intelligence systems, airborne early warning and control systems, tanker aircraft, electronic warfare aircraft and anti-tactical ballistic missiles as systems that will follow the F-X program.<sup>35</sup> These systems could detect a DPRK threat, warn South Korea, and demonstrate the ability to strike the North, should it act aggressively. Finally, in 1999, Korea initiated development on an indigenous stealth material program that "satisfied about 70 percent of operational requirements of the country's military."<sup>36</sup> Each of these developments would increase South Korea's ability to strike the North, and also serve to establish the ROK as a modern independent regional force.

As Jong Kun Choi and Jon-Yun Bae explained, "Since 1994, South Korea's military has focused on enhancing its conventional deterrence capacity in addition to securing the extended deterrence from the United States. The various governments of South Korea, regardless of their ideological orientation, have exerted enormous efforts to modernize and upgrade South Korea's military capabilities."<sup>37</sup> While the United States certainly already had the most advanced air forces in the world, South Korea continued its path of conventional military modernization to not only counter the DPRK nuclear threat, but to establish its own autonomous defense force in Northeast Asia.

Conventional air modernization was not the only development that demonstrated the South Korean strategic culture of self-reliance. Naval modernization showed a desire for self-reliant forces. However, unlike air development, naval modernization during the period was not focused on countering North Korean nuclear aggression. The republic's efforts toward a self-reliant navy aimed at expanding South Korean military power in the region. Through the 1990s, the ROK Navy primarily focused on protecting South Korean territorial waters and islands. In June 1993, it commissioned the *Changboghham*, a 1,200-ton imported submarine. A year later, the ROK deployed its first

domestically built submarine.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the century, South Korea had begun a naval expansion for protection beyond its regional waters. In 1999, the Ministry of National Defense announced the ROK Navy would procure three Aegis-class destroyers in addition to its small fleet of landing craft to support its ROK Marine Corps operations. Additionally, it began planning for Korean versions of a destroyer, a heavy landing ship, and mine-laying and mine-hunting ships.<sup>39</sup> Andrew O'Neil suggested these naval modernizations were less focused on North Korea, and more to establish the ROK as a regional power capable of independent blue-water operations.<sup>40</sup> Thus, although South Korean strategic culture still drove efforts toward an autonomous navy, maritime modernization was not aimed at countering DPRK nuclear aggression.

As opposed to conventional developments, Seoul did not seek to develop indigenous nuclear weapons. While Seoul had secretly procured a weapons programs in the 1970s and 1980s, it did not see its own nuclear program as necessary for autonomous defense during the First Nuclear Crisis. Surveys of South Korean society provide some reasons. A poll by Gi Wook Shin highlighted that even college students – the most anti-American group – acknowledged the American alliance contribution to Korean national security.<sup>41</sup> His survey showed a majority of students supportive of American military forces remaining on the Korean peninsula rather than withdrawing immediately (55 percent to 36 percent).<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Choi and Bae explained, "South Korea is constrained by formidable anti-nuclear social norms as well as an alliance structure that has discouraged their development."<sup>43</sup>

In 1991, President Roh Tae-woo announced ROK's unwillingness to "manufacture, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in 1993 when President Kim Young-Sam was asked if he would categorically rule out development of South Korea's own nuclear weapons, he responded, "Absolutely. That would disrupt peace in Northeast Asia and peace in the world at large."<sup>45</sup> Etel Solingen summarized, "Despite a North Korean threat to turn Seoul into a 'sea of fire,' there seems to be little popular and governmental support for a South Korean nuclear deterrent."<sup>46</sup> North Korean nuclear programs were not seen as grave enough to merit South Korean nuclear weapons. An indigenous nuclear program was not only contrary to what the South Korea's populace and government felt they needed, but it would also add little to the alliance's existing deterrent structure and would likely only lead to more instability in Northeast Asia.

Thus, the republic sought to balance the U.S. nuclear deterrent with a modern conventional aerial deterrent. This balance of dependence and autonomy is best summarized in the joint communique from the 28th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in November 1996 between U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry and ROK Minister of National Defense Kim Dong Jin. In it, "Secretary Perry reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to render prompt and effective assistance to repel any armed attack against the ROK ... and to provide a nuclear umbrella for the ROK. Minister Kim reaffirmed that the ROK will continue to modernize its armed forces and to assume increased responsibility for its own defense."<sup>47</sup> The U.S. nuclear umbrella along with ROK's conventional weapons development filled requirements that addressed not only North Korea's threat, but also Seoul's desire to establish a self-reliant force.

The First Nuclear Crisis provides evidence that U.S. policy has not been the sole factor determining South Korea's responses to North Korea's nuclear aggression. Although the United States had the military capability to protect South Korea, Seoul

sought an independent military. Seoul envisioned this self-reliant force as being able to respond to North Korea's nuclear threats. While Seoul did not reinstate a nuclear weapons program from decades past in the face of the First Nuclear Crisis, it followed its own policy regarding conventional weapons as demonstrated by its air modernization programs. South Korean polls and leadership statements show that the country saw an indigenous nuclear program as unnecessary and destabilizing. While U.S. extended deterrence seems to have satisfied Seoul at one end of the spectrum, conventionally, South Korea sought conventional deterrence through an air force capable of striking anywhere in North Korea. Conflicts arising between South Korea's preference for diplomatic engagement and the Bush administration's handling of the Second Nuclear Crisis demonstrate even greater autonomy in Seoul's efforts to counter North Korea's nuclear aggression.

### — 2003-2007: The Second Nuclear Crisis —

The Second Nuclear Crisis began in late 2002 when North Korea allegedly admitted that it had a secret nuclear weapons program based on highly enriched uranium, in violation of the soon to be defunct Agreed Framework. Through the next five years, North Korea announced it had nuclear weapons, launched seven ballistic missiles, and tested its first nuclear weapon.<sup>48</sup> However, major factors affecting this crisis trace back to 2001 and the George W. Bush administration's hardline policy toward North Korea.

Contrary to the Clinton administration's ultimate policy of engaging Pyongyang diplomatically in order to denuclearize, President Bush's policy sought to coerce Pyongyang by refusing direct engagement until Pyongyang stood down its nuclear program. This was particularly alarming to North Korea in the face of the administration's preemptive attack policy and regime change threats. President Bush specifically called out North Korea in his first State of the Union address saying, "North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction ... States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger."<sup>49</sup> Additionally, soon after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime fell, Bush announced, "Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. We cannot put our faith in the words of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them."<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, President Bush's policy was at odds with South Korea in countering the North Korean nuclear issue. Polling in 2004 showed that while 80 percent of South Koreans would approve of a U.S.-led preemptive attack on North Korea if the United Nations, South Korean government, and other allies agreed, the numbers dropped precipitously if any of those conditions were not reached.<sup>51</sup> If the United Nations and South Korea approved and allies did not, the approval dropped to 38 percent while any combination without United Nations or South Korean approval ranged from nine percent to 27 percent approval.<sup>52</sup> According to another report in May 2002, only 56 percent of the respondents wanted to maintain the alliance — down significantly from 89 percent in 1999.<sup>53</sup>

Korean nationalism and a desire for South Korea to play an independent regional role "was on a collision course with the Bush administration's hardline approach."<sup>54</sup> This played out in the Roh administration statements that increasingly countered

President Bush's policy. President Roh was sympathetic to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons pursuit as a tool to deter external aggression. He stated, "North Korea's nuclear weapons pursuit cannot be viewed as an instrument to attack ... or to assist terrorist groups"<sup>55</sup> and "taking too tough a stance against North Korea could cause friction and disagreement between South Korea and the United States."<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in 2003, President Roh's envoy to Washington revealed that Seoul "would rather have a nuclear North Korea than a chaotic collapse of the government there."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, while the Bush administration took on a more hostile approach, Seoul maintained its course of engagement. To build relations with Pyongyang, the Roh government encouraged other regional countries to interact with North Korea and engaged in the joint Kaesong industrial park as part of his Peace and Prosperity policy.<sup>58</sup> His Unification Minister Chung Dong-young also announced that Seoul would "play a leadership role in managing the North Korean issue, rather than meekly embracing the U.S. approach."<sup>59</sup> Despite even North Korea's first underground nuclear test in 2006, Seoul maintained this path of diplomatic independence. In response to the test, along with Russia and China, South Korea remained opposed to the use of force for fear of escalating the situation out of control.<sup>60</sup> South Korean Prime Minister Han Myung Sook said Seoul would support U.N. sanctions, but "not military action that could spread into a war on the divided, densely armed Korean Peninsula."<sup>61</sup>

Because the paths of diplomatic policy and military action were at odds between the two countries, South Korea had to strike a balance to maintain the U.S. alliance while still demonstrating its culture of independence in regional security. In his U.N. General Assembly speech in 2004, South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon called for Pyongyang to cease its nuclear activities, while also declaring that inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation would continue.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in 2006, President Roh stated, "There is no difference in views between Korea and the United States ... but the Korean government does not agree to the opinions of some in Washington who wish for a collapse of the North Korean regime or their attempts to pressure it."<sup>63</sup> Throughout the period, South Korea sought to establish its independence in security matters by maintaining its policy of engagement without alienating the military alliance.<sup>64</sup>

One way South Korea maintained the U.S. military alliance throughout the period without resorting to force was to continue development of a conventional force capable of countering North Korea. Historically, the United States has strengthened the bilateral alliance by actively supporting the improvement of ROK armed forces. Thus, announced in 2005, South Korea's Defense Reform 2020 Plan aligned military modernization with U.S. support, while also creating an independent regional force. Further, the 2008 ROK Defense White Paper highlighted, "We will continue to build an all-directional military readiness and defense capabilities that enable us to protect our nation against not only North Korea's military threats, but against all threats across the spectrum. The ROK-U.S. Alliance will evolve into a future-oriented strategic alliance."

Again, naval and aerial modernization demonstrate the South Korean preference for security independence while balancing the U.S. military alliance against North Korea. President Roh carried on President Kim Dae-jung's vision for a blue-water navy as part of the plan that would, by 2020, become a navy with 70 ships to include destroyers, submarines and Aegis cruisers, and double the aircraft.<sup>65</sup> To highlight Seoul's desire for an autonomous navy, South Korea developed six DDH-II destroyers, one of which was commissioned each year from

2003 to 2008. Not only were these stealth ships heavily armed, but they were developed to be independent command ships in a combat task force able to provide command and control during battle for alliance forces.<sup>66</sup> Seoul's naval modernization, as President Lee Myung Bak stated in 2008, was part of Seoul's vision to "build a state-of-the-art force that can protect our maritime sovereignty."<sup>67</sup> As during the first crisis, a South Korean blue-water navy would do little to counter DPRK nuclear aggression, but it was to project ROK power within and beyond the region.

Similarly, South Korea continued its major modernization in its air force. In 2004, 40 F-X jets were to begin filling ROK Air Force inventories as well as replacing older existing helicopters with Korea's next-generation attack helicopter.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, ROK defense planned to acquire four Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) by 2008.<sup>69</sup> Finally, during this period the ROK decided to pursue missile defense, creating a command and budget for Patriot missile defense systems. However, South Korea sought to build it independently out of concern that U.S. cooperation would affect its relations with China.<sup>70</sup> Under Defense Reform 2020, the ROK Air Force vision was to have an organizational structure for air superiority and precision strikes capable of constant vigilance and immediate response, to include retaliatory strikes during peacetime.<sup>71</sup> Once again, the ROK Air Force modernization focused on the ability to strike and punish North Korea in order to bolster its conventional deterrent.

While South Korea continued its modernization of conventional weapons, it restrained from developing nuclear weapons during the years of the Second Nuclear Crisis. Polling of South Korean perceptions provides insight into ROK nuclear opinions. In 2004, while 59 percent of South Koreans rated a nuclear North Korea as a "critical threat" to South Korea's strategic interests,<sup>72</sup> most South Koreans (60 percent) opposed U.S. employment of nuclear weapons under any circumstance.<sup>73</sup> Yet despite this strong opposition, a slight majority (51 percent) agreed that South Korea should have nuclear weapons.<sup>74</sup> This number increased dramatically following the DPRK's first nuclear test when 65 percent of South Korean respondents held that an indigenous nuclear capability was necessary.<sup>75</sup>

However, statements from ROK leadership demonstrated Seoul's confidence in the U.S. nuclear deterrent muting proposals for an indigenous nuclear program. President Moo-hyun said, "The United States has promised to guarantee deterrence against North Korea's nuclear weapons and we're maintaining our relations with the United States in that direction."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the U.S.-South Korea joint communique following North Korea's first nuclear test, included "assurances of firm U.S. commitment and immediate support to the ROK, including continuation of the extended deterrence offered by the U.S. nuclear umbrella."<sup>77</sup> Thus, despite growing interest in a nuclear program, South Korea's military efforts remained concentrated on conventional deterring North Korea and establishing a self-reliant force capable of projecting regional power. This force would continue to remain dependent on the assurances of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.

### — 2008 to Present: A Growing Third Nuclear Crisis —

The current growing nuclear crisis is directly linked to

North Korea's intense weaponization programs. At the end of 2007, as part of the Six-Party Talks, Pyongyang promised to provide a "complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs" and to disable its nuclear facilities.<sup>78</sup> However, North Korea's continued aggression escalated tensions once again on the peninsula. Along with Pyongyang's continued ballistic missile tests, North Korea sank the ROK ship *Cheonan* and shelled Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. It also carried out its second, third, and fourth nuclear tests in 2009, 2013, and 2016 respectively. This growing crisis revealed that even with a conservative party leadership, South Korea's preference for diplomacy and defense independence remained, while demonstrating an increasingly popular support for indigenous nuclear weapons.

Even with the election of the ROK's first conservative president in a decade, Lee Myung-bak, South Korea continued to show its preference for diplomacy, though now it was revealed as more coercive than the "carrot" methods of his predecessors. Diplomacy during this period mirrored the President George W. Bush administration's policy of requiring progress toward denuclearization, prior to compromises by Seoul. However, in 2009, following Pyongyang's second nuclear test, polls still showed more than 73 percent of South Koreans still supported an engagement policy with North Korea giving credence to the idea that diplomacy remains South Korea's preference even with eventual North Korean weaponization.<sup>79</sup> In 2010, following the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the North's provocations on Yeonpyeong, South Korea ceased diplomatic engagement, cut almost all trade with the North, and rallied international support for sanctions against Pyongyang.<sup>80</sup> Further, although recognizing diplomacy was needed, South Korea refused to return to Six-Party Talks until Pyongyang showed commitment to denuclearization and accepted responsibility for the two incidents.<sup>81</sup>

In 2011, President Lee Myung-bak proposed an invitation for Pyongyang to the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit to restart talks, yet maintained the North "must acknowledge its wrongdoings [for the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong]" and "allow back nuclear inspectors and halt its uranium enrichment program."<sup>82</sup> In the years that followed from 2012 to 2017, North Korea's two nuclear tests and multiple ballistic missile launches were met with South Korean support for sanctions. Finally, in 2017 the Trump administration's "maximum pressure and engagement" policy met with the ROK's new Moon administration's efforts to engage North Korea and include China in a diplomatic solution. Thus, throughout this period, South Korea tended toward coercive diplomacy as opposed to appeasement to address North Korean denuclearization, but still opposed military force for conflict resolution.

During this period, polling showed a change in perception regarding both Pyongyang and the United States from previous periods. A 2011 survey revealed that South Koreans increasingly saw North Koreans as the "enemy" rather than "one of us" and nearly 68 percent thought North Korean nuclear weapons were for nuclear blackmail not defense.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, a large majority saw North Korea to blame for poor inter-Korean relations and the failure of progress in finding a resolution to the nuclear crisis.<sup>84</sup> Finally, polling showed the United States as most favorable nation and North Korea scoring the least favorable.<sup>85</sup> These reports showed a shift of enmity and blame from the United States to Pyongyang and high regard for the U.S. military alliance.

In addition to showing a continued preference for diplomacy, the newest crisis again demonstrated South Korea's culture for military independence. With a conservative government, the republic remained focused on military modernization to create an independent conventional force, but also countered North Korea with small-scale military responses. For example, the day after North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, Seoul announced it would participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative, a U.S. policy, which allows states "to search and interdict North Korean ships and aircraft for contraband items (the weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and illegal weapons) on and over the high seas."<sup>86</sup> Despite pressure from the Bush administration, Seoul had previously refused to participate in the initiative during the Second Nuclear Crisis. Additionally, in 2014 following North Korea's announcement of a new form of nuclear testing, the North and South exchanged fire of hundreds of artillery shells, though the artillery fell harmlessly into the Western Sea.<sup>87</sup>

In 2016, South Korea announced a new modernization program to develop a conventional deterrent response alongside the U.S. nuclear deterrent. A key area of South Korea's conventional response was through a three-pillar system to be fully operational in the 2020s. Though different parts of the system have been in the works for years, this was the first formal declaration of the three-pillared plan.

The first pillar, Kill Chain is a system of satellites and missiles to detect and pre-emptively strike DPRK missiles. Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) is the second pillar and is an anti-ballistic missile system that complements the United States Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to intercept North Korean ballistic missiles. Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR), the third pillar, is a plan to retaliate and punish North Korea with missiles in case of a North Korean strike.<sup>88</sup> South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-koo told the ROK National Assembly, "The military is developing the three-pillar system that will provide tailored measures to deter threats from the North's weapons of mass destruction."<sup>89</sup> Similarly, President Moon reiterated the "needs to develop our military capabilities in the face of North Korea's nuclear advancement."<sup>90</sup> Through developing precise retaliatory capabilities and robust missile defense, Seoul demonstrated its independence in creating a punitive and denial-focused deterrent force aimed at North Korea.

While creating an independent conventional deterrent, Seoul has maintained its reliance on the U.S. alliance for nuclear deterrence. However, growing calls for nuclear weapons in South Korea demonstrate the country's preference for independent defense. O'Neil highlights that the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong provocations in 2010 reduced the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. As a result, the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) was created "to develop a tailored bilateral deterrence strategy ... to enhance effective deterrence options against the nuclear and WMD threats from North Korea."<sup>91</sup> One of the EDPC's first actions was to review the possibility of redeploying American tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.<sup>92</sup> Polling the following year showed almost 63 percent of South Korean respondents supported an indigenous nuclear weapons program.<sup>93</sup> While public support for nuclear weapons subsided since the 2010 provocations, it resurfaced in the face of Pyongyang's further nuclear aggression in 2017 when polling showed nearly 70 percent of South Koreans wanted the United States to reintroduce tactical nuclear weapons<sup>94</sup> and 60 percent approved of an indigenous ROK nuclear weapons program<sup>95</sup> – up from 54 percent in 2016.<sup>96</sup>

Nuclear weapons acquisition also became an increasingly acceptable political platform. Former presidential secretary for security strategy, Cheon Seong-whun, said, "If we don't respond with our own nuclear deterrence of some kind, our people will live like nuclear hostages of North Korea."<sup>97</sup> Additionally, opposition party leader Won Yoo-chul implied there was a growing need for the ROK to have its own nuclear weapons: "If the U.N. Security Council can't rein in North Korea with its sanctions, we will have no option, but to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty."<sup>98</sup>

Even President Moon Jae-in's defense minister broached the idea of accepting U.S. tactical nuclear weapons saying that "the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons would be the surest way" to deter North Korea.<sup>99</sup> However, in the face of growing support for nuclear weapons, President Moon reiterated Seoul's stance on nuclear weapons, stating, "I do not agree that South Korea needs to develop our own nuclear weapons or relocate tactical nuclear weapons in the face of North Korea's nuclear threat."<sup>100</sup> Moon sees nuclear weapons on South Korean soil as adding little to the combination of ROK's conventional deterrent and U.S. extended deterrent. Further nuclear weapons, in his eyes, would lead to instability in Northeast Asia.<sup>101</sup>

### — Analysis —

While all three nuclear crises developed under separate circumstances, certain trends emerge showing South Korean strategic culture in its responses to North Korean nuclear aggression. First, in support of Hypothesis 1, South Korea has maintained a preference for diplomacy and an aversion to war with regards to a nuclear North Korea. Based on polling and South Korean leadership statements, during years of both conservative and progressive party power, Seoul has not sought an offensive military response to North Korea. Either North Korean nuclear programs are not viewed as a large enough threat to risk offensive military aggression or South Korea fears escalating a war that would disrupt South Korea's regional progress. This preference for diplomacy, and even the type of engagements sought, have at times conflicted with American responses throughout the crises. Yet interestingly, it was U.S. policy that changed to fall in line with ROK after President Clinton's plans for surgical military strikes.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, the ROK has consistently postured for defense and deterrence in its conventional military responses to a nuclear DPRK. This approach was contrary to early U.S. plans to strike the Yongbyon nuclear facility and is manifested in its weapons development. Through all three periods, South Korea has balanced its autonomy with the alliance by military modernization. ROK Air Force modernizations tended to focus on deterring North Korea through deep precision strikes, air superiority, and ballistic missile defense. These same weapons would prove less useful against a greater threat, such as the Chinese, but they could be used in both denial and retaliatory deterrent functions. At the same time, the ROK has modernized its navy. However, maritime development is less focused on deterring North Korean nuclear aggression, and instead on its goals of regional autonomy while still supporting the alliance.

Finally, in support of Hypothesis 3, while creating its own conventional deterrent, Seoul has remained supportive of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. South Korea's stance did not change throughout the crises, even when the Korean public and government officials heavily favored indigenous nuclear weapons. Once again, this could be the ROK's way of balancing a

self-reliant force without alienating or denigrating the nuclear capabilities that the United States brings to the alliance. However, growing support for nuclear weapons deployed on South Korea showed that the future constraints against nuclear weapons might weaken as the ROK continues its path toward a completely self-reliant force. In all, analysis of the three periods refutes the idea that U.S. policy is the sole driving force behind South Korean responses to North Korea. Instead, the ROK's strategic culture of independence and self-reliance manifests itself in the diplomatic and conventional military responses while still leaving room for a pragmatic reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

### — Conclusion —

Debates will continue over the way forward on the Korean Peninsula with Washington and Seoul likely not always seeing eye to eye. By looking at the three periods, some general implications are revealed concerning diplomatic, conventional military and nuclear response options. Throughout all three periods, South Korea has supported diplomacy, though at times the engagement approach has differed. This clear preference for diplomacy contradicts some of the rhetoric of the Donald Trump administration, and Washington should be cautious not to isolate its South Korean allies when touting military options. The United States and South Korea will need to continue to adjust their engagement approaches to demonstrate a firm alliance. At times, each country may need to compromise in drawing the line of aggressive engagement with Pyongyang. Currently, both Washington and Seoul support engagement with North Korea backed by firm sanctions, but the compromised stance has yet to approach the military options suggested by the current American administration.

Other implications emerge from the ROK's military modernization. South Korea maintained its objective for independent defense on the conventional side through modernization of its military. Although the United States traditionally encourages its allies to build strong defense forces, South Korea has taken its own path in producing a conventional three-pillared deterrent against the DPRK, seemingly redundant to the U.S. nuclear deterrent. The United States should seek to understand the "why" behind the conventional deterrent. Is it a signal of reduced assurance of the nuclear umbrella, expanding flexible options, or a sign of the ROK's independence?

Military modernization provides insights into policy implications as well. The ROK Air Force modernization has particularly been aimed at North Korea through deep strike fighters and anti-ballistic missile systems postured for defense and retaliation. Thus, by pushing strong support for ROK air modernization in defense responses, the United States could support a denial and punishment deterrence strategy against North Korea, which may appear less antagonistic to Pyongyang than preemptive strikes. Additionally, Seoul's air modernization began in the 1990s, yet was not formally announced as part of its conventional deterrence until the Third Nuclear Crisis period. The United States should look at allied weapons acquisitions over the long term so as not to be surprised when a formal strategy or plan emerges based on years of weapons modernization.

Additionally, the current American administration has shown wariness of allies being too dependent on the United States, even suggesting free-riding. South Korea's naval developments suggest that Seoul does not present a free-riding problem. While not aimed at countering a nuclear North Korea, Seoul's navy demonstrates a desire for taking responsibility for

regional security and supporting global operations. Instead of suggesting free-riding, the United States needs to be increasingly aware of the potential for South Korea to develop more aggressive, independent offensive capabilities. Moreover, seeing that regional power projection seems to be the focus of ROK naval modernization, the United States should consider how a growing ROK Navy might affect other U.S. alliances in the region, in particular Japan.

Finally, from a nuclear response perspective, South Korean public and political opinion showed an increasing favorability for nuclear weapons. Though South Korea has been content to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, South Korean strategic culture of independence may eventually outweigh the pragmatic benefits of American extended deterrence. If Seoul were to see the DPRK nuclear program as critical to ROK national survival, the United States should be prepared to offer nuclear options that strengthen the alliance and still support the NPT. This may mean redeploying nuclear weapons in the region to convince Seoul not to seek its own independent nuclear weapons. However, given Seoul's stance through the three periods, anything beyond studies of possible United States reintroduction of nuclear weapons would be premature.

The U.S.-ROK alliance has been a solid partnership over the last 60-plus years, with the United States providing both conventional and nuclear forces to defend the region from North Korean aggression. South Korea has shown in the last two decades that in the face of increasing DPRK nuclear aggression, it will not sit back and rely on U.S. military power. North Korea is a threat to the United States. However, when dealing with Pyongyang, the United States cannot forget that North Korea is a threat to Seoul as well. Seoul may not always see the threat the same way as Washington though. Accordingly, South Korean strategic culture has and will continue to play a major role in determining its efforts to counter North Korean nuclear provocation.



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