

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Securing Nuclear Latency is Another Option South Korea Can Consider

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As North Korea's nuclear threat has advanced, the Washington Declaration in 2023 marked an effort by South Korea and the United States to strengthen extended deterrence through measures such as the regular deployment of strategic assets and the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). However, North Korea has shown little regard for these efforts, continuing to test various nuclear delivery systems and casting a "nuclear shadow" over the Korean Peninsula.

As a result, over 70% of South Koreans now support the indigenous acquisition of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, pursuing an indigenous nuclear weapons program is not a simple matter. It could lead to international sanctions, economic damage, and a loss of global credibility due to a withdrawal from the NPT, not to mention domestic Not In My Backyard(NIMBY) issues. As such, alternatives like the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or the development of nuclear latency capabilities have entered the conversation.

While figures such as voices at CSIS, John Bolton, and Senator Roger Wicker have voiced support for the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, the idea remains a minority position in Washington, and the U.S. government maintains a cautious stance due to anticipated opposition from China and Russia.

In this context, securing nuclear latency is being discussed as a second-best option. This refers to maintaining the capability to rapidly transition to nuclear armament in a contingency, without actually possessing nuclear weapons in peacetime. South Korea has already achieved self-reliance in nuclear technology and possesses considerable expertise in uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Although the ROK-U.S. Nuclear Cooperation Agreement

imposes restrictions, the accumulated experience may allow for a shift to nuclear armament in a crisis scenario.

The pursuit of nuclear latency offers the following strategic benefits:

1. **Signaling to North Korea:** Compared to a posture that relies solely on U.S. retaliation, a South Korea equipped with latent nuclear capability exerts significantly greater pressure on North Korea.
2. **Leverage over China and Russia:** South Korea's nuclear latency can serve as a tool to pressure China and Russia, both of which have effectively condoned North Korea's nuclear development.
3. **Diversity in Delivery Systems:** South Korea already possesses a range of delivery platforms superior to North Korea's, including dual-capable aircraft such as the F-35 and F-16, as well as the Hyunmoo-series missiles.

Whether the United States would support South Korea's pursuit of nuclear latency remains uncertain. However, if framed not as an "independent nuclear force" but as part of an "allied nuclear posture," U.S. cooperation could be more forthcoming. Given Washington's historical cooperation with nuclear-armed allies like the UK and France, there is potential for South Korea's nuclear latency to be recognized as an asset to the alliance.

According to a 2023 joint report by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and RAND Corporation, North Korea could increase its nuclear fissile stockpile for up to 300 nuclear warheads by 2027, while China's and Russia's nuclear arsenals are also rapidly expanding. Facing this emerging nuclear-armed axis, it may no longer be viable for the United States and the West alone to counterbalance the threat. South Korea's nuclear latency could help fill this strategic gap.

Potential cooperation with Japan is also on the table. While Japan adheres to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, rising threats from North Korea may prompt discussion of a joint Korea–Japan nuclear latency posture—paving the way for an Indo-Pacific nuclear coalition.

In conclusion, with North Korea's nuclear threat becoming a constant and public trust in U.S. extended deterrence weakening, securing nuclear latency is emerging as an inevitable strategic alternative. Now is the time to think the unthinkable.

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(‘핵 잠재력(nuclear latency)’의 확보도 우리의 대안이다)