

South Korean Nuclear Aspiration and its Impact on Regional Security

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex and multifaceted challenges surrounding South Korea's nuclear weapons programme. It is recognised that as a key player in the regional and global security landscape, South Korea's decisions on this issue will have far-reaching implications for the future of international security and stability. Drawing on the Nuclear Revolution Theory, the paper examines the potential benefits and drawbacks of possessing nuclear weapons, as well as the historical context and regional security considerations that have shaped South Korea's past interest in a nuclear weapons programme. The study also analyses the current geopolitical landscape, including the danger posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and US policy on nuclear proliferation. The viability of the nuclear weapons programme and its implications for South Korea are assessed through qualitative reasoning. The South Korean potentials for nuclear proliferation, its negative impact on global non-proliferation efforts, its deterrence value against North Korea and regional security benefits are examined. Alternatives to pursuing a nuclear weapons programme, such as strengthening conventional military capabilities and diplomatic

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efforts to denuclearise the Korean peninsula are also discussed.

Key Words: Nuclear Revolution Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, Deterrence, Nuclear strategy, Nuclear Weapons, North Korea, South Korea.

Introduction

South Korea's military is primarily focused on defending borders from neighbouring North Korea, which it considers a serious military threat given the nature of its bilateral relations. Geography dictates the relations between these two states. Located in East Asia, the country has arch-rival North Korea on its Northern, the Sea of Japan on the Eastern, the Yellow Sea on its Western and the Korean Strait on its Southern Border. Having a population of 51 million, South Korea is the 28th largest state in the world and has a strong military with over half a million active-duty personnel.³

South Korea has improvised in developing advanced conventional weapons capabilities to take on a nuclear-armed rival North Korea, which is a unique modus operandi for a non-nuclear armed state.⁴ In September 2021, South Korea tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), becoming the first non-nuclear country with such a capability.⁵ In January 2023, President Yoon Suk Yeol stated that if threats from North Korea worsen, the country may move towards developing "tactical nuclear weapons."⁶ Such calls have been thwarted by the international

³ "South Korea", CIA World Factbook, accessed June 12, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-south/#people-and-society>

⁴ Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional counterforce dilemmas: South Korea's deterrence strategy and stability on the Korean Peninsula", *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2020): 7-39.

⁵ Kelsey Davenport, "South Korea Tests Submarine-Launched Missile", *Arms Control Today* 51, no. 8 (2021): 34-34.

⁶ Kelsey Davenport, "South Korea walks back Nuclear Weapons Comments" *Arms Control Association*, last modified March, 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/news/south-korea-walks-back-nuclear-weapons-comments>