

This opinion piece “No Time for Nukes” by PCI Board Member Dr. Chung-in Moon appeared in the JoongAng Daily on May 10, 2011.

[Viewpoint] No time for nukes

**China isn't likely to tolerate U.S. nuclear weapons in its neighborhood, and would only move toward closer military ties with North Korea.**

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The debate on the need for South Korea to have nuclear weapons to balance power on the peninsula is resurfacing.

Some people, out of frustration and national pride, argue that we need nuclear weapons as a deterrence against the nuclear menace from North Korea, while others champion a more moderate strategy of bringing back U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to strengthen Seoul's bargaining ability and provide a deterrence to attack from Pyongyang.

The argument is brewing as North Korea continues to build up its nuclear armory while six-party international talks aimed at dismantling that weapons program remain suspended.

But it has never been easy, and won't be so at any time, for South Korea to arm itself with nukes. South Korea is constrained by various international treaties and no one wants a race to build up nuclear arms in East Asia.

The nation is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, and therefore cannot receive, manufacture or get any assistance to produce nuclear explosive devices or weapons under Article 2. It is also under obligation to comply with safeguard regulations of the International Atomic Energy Agency. It cannot emulate Israel, which has refused to sign the NPT and is believed to be one of the states with a clandestine nuclear weapons program.

If Seoul wanted to pursue nuclear sovereignty, it must leave the NPT just like Pyongyang did. But that would end our supplies of uranium, enriched uranium and other materials from the Nuclear Supply Group, which includes the United States.

Without such key supplies, South Korea would have to close down 21 of its nuclear power reactors and suspend plans to add 11 more. In short, South Korea's nuclear power industry, which is responsible for 40 percent of the country's electricity supply, would be paralyzed overnight. A punitive action from the international community for turning into a rogue nuclear state would be more devastating. South Korea would be lumped together with countries like North Korea and Iran.

Also at stake would be the bilateral nuclear power cooperation treaty with the U.S. signed in 1954. They can cut off all ties in nuclear cooperation and demand restitution of uranium stock. Bilateral relations could turn frigid fast, as in the 1970s, when Seoul secretly pursued a nuclear weapons program.

Even if Seoul promised not to use its nuclear capabilities for anything but peaceful purposes, it wouldn't have a very comfortable seat at negotiations over a new nuclear cooperation treaty that needs to be renewed after March 2014. Washington, which is sensitive to nuclear proliferation, may not listen to Korea's request to reprocess spent nuclear fuel, even for research.

The less controversial idea of restoring U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on our soil isn't not feasible either. Ever since President Barack Obama described in a 2009 speech in Prague a vision of a world without nuclear weapons, the U.S. has been making changes in its posture on nuclear issues.

In its Nuclear Posture Review in 2010, Washington announced plans to use strategic nuclear weapons rather than tactical ones to keep its deterrence commitment to defend its allies. It has slashed tactical nuclear arms, which numbered as much as 7,300 in Europe in 1971, to 200 in 2010. The remaining weapons now serve no more than a symbolic role.

Even if the U.S. made South Korea an exception and returned tactical weapons here, the new posture wouldn't help solve the North Korean nuclear conundrum. It would only give a pretext to Pyongyang to nullify the six-party dialogue platform and go even further in its weapons program.

China isn't likely to tolerate U.S. nuclear weapons in its general neighborhood and would only move toward closer military ties with North Korea. Such a development would only aggravate the security risks for South Korea, as the tactical nuclear weapons would provide new targets for North Korean attacks.

World leaders will gather in Seoul in April next year for a nuclear security summit. It would give the host country a pretty bad name if it is making noise about nuclear weapons development or begging for tactical weapons to be deployed here, while on the other hand, it's waving a banner for "a world without nuclear weapons."

It does us no good to insult our closest ally, who protects us under its nuclear umbrella. It's time we stop this dumb talk about nuclear weapons.

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