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## [Column] Nuclear armament is a lose-lose-lose for South Korea

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The path toward acquiring nuclear weapons could jeopardize Korea's survival, endanger its prosperity, and damage its prestige in the international community



President Yoon Suk-yeol speaks during a report by the Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs held at the Blue House guest house on Feb. 11. (courtesy of the presidential office)



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After President Yoon Suk-yeol broached the possibility of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons in January, discussion of that possibility has been picking up steam.

According to the results of a poll of 1,000 people published by the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies on Jan. 30, 76.6% of respondents agreed that South Korea needs to develop nuclear weapons. Then on Feb. 15, the office of National Assembly lawmaker Choe Jae-hyeong and the Northeast Asia Diplomacy & Security Forum co-hosted a public debate about South Korea's nuclear armament and a stronger alliance with the US.

This indicates that the taboo on South Korean nuclear weapons that has been in place since the 1970s is breaking down.

The primary rationale given for acquiring nuclear weapons is national security. The goals of national security are ensuring the survival of the state, the prosperity of the country, and the prestige of the nation.

But the path toward acquiring nuclear weapons could have paradoxical results, not only jeopardizing Korea's survival and endangering its prosperity but also severely damaging its prestige in the international community. Let's examine those prospects one by one.

The case for acquiring nuclear weapons is based on the argument that the US' extended deterrence is not reliable and that South Korea should counter North Korea's nuclear weapons with nuclear weapons of its own. But we have more to lose than to gain from such a choice.

South Korean nuclear armament would not only set off a nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula if the North then expands its own nuclear arsenal but also increase the likelihood of a nuclear war occurring because of a misunderstanding, miscalculation or mistake.

It would also provoke a nuclear buildup and other countermoves in China and the Russian Far East, further heightening military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. If Japan made its own move to acquire nuclear weapons to counter South Korea, it would place the Korean Peninsula at the center of the nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia.

The greatest risk of a South Korean nuclear program is that it could lead to a rupture in South Korea's alliance with the US. Advocates of South Korean nuclear armament argue that the US would not strongly oppose such a program because it would have the effect of countering China, but that's a serious misunderstanding.

Nonproliferation advocates have much more sway in Washington than supporters of the South Korea-US alliance, and very few believe that a nuclear-armed South Korea would be as pliable with the US as it has been in the past.

Therefore, the naïve expectation that South Korea's nuclear armament would strengthen its alliance with the US is essentially a fantasy. Nuclear armament would lead to a rift in the South Korea-US alliance and the deterioration of the Northeast Asia security environment, culminating in a nightmare security scenario for us.

Nuclear armament advocates often bring up the examples of India and Pakistan to argue that South Korea could withstand the sanctions and other forms of pressure that the international community might impose after a move to acquire nuclear weapons. But that's a seriously blinkered argument.

As soon as South Korean enrichment or reprocessing is discovered by inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the agency will refer South Korea to the UN Security Council for a discussion of potential sanctions.

South Koreans will still vividly recall the severity of the blowback to the disclosure in 2004 that a group of rogue nuclear scientists had enriched a small amount of uranium (0.2g) in an experiment. It was Korea's friends and allies — countries like the US and the UK — that were most vociferous in their criticism at the time.

Independent sanctions by the US, Japan and the EU, and particularly financial sanctions by the US, could devastate Korea's export-oriented economy in a heartbeat. The impact would be much greater than that suffered by India and Pakistan, which had long pursued a strategy of import substitution.

One certain outcome is that the South Korean nuclear power industry would suffer a crushing blow. In contrast with India and Pakistan, Korea's nuclear energy industry has been fully dependent on the US.

Article 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 prohibits South Korea from using any nuclear materials, equipment or technology received from the US in military applications, including the development of nuclear weapons. If South Korea violates those rules or the IAEA's inspection rules, it would have to immediately return all those materials and equipment to the US.

Furthermore, the Nuclear Suppliers Group would stop supplying the requisite raw materials to South Korea. Clandestine nuclear weapons development would not only paralyze South Korea's nuclear power industry but also prevent it from exporting reactors for the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Since South Korea's nuclear armament would also entail withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), it could seriously weaken Korea's international image. If South Korea were to become the first democratic state to withdraw from the NPT, it would forfeit the moral superiority over North Korea it has enjoyed internationally since making the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization in 1992 and would also likely face the stigma of being a rogue state that is undermining the international nonproliferation regime.

Many nuclear armament advocates talk as if we're doomed to helpless subservience unless we choose independent nuclear armament, but that choice would have a fatal impact on our survival, prosperity and prestige.

Doesn't Washington place more strategic value on East Asia than ever before? Hasn't it repeatedly affirmed that it will provide Korea with extended deterrence?

South Korea and the US' combined force structure remains healthy, and there's still a path to a diplomatic solution through dialogue and negotiations.

Given these circumstances, I struggle to understand why so many insist on the self-defeating approach of nuclear armament.

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