



Security Council

Topic Guide: The question of nuclear arms in South Korea

Key Definitions

Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – This is an international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology to promote cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament. South Korea is one of the many members, as well as the US and China.

Introduction

Although South Korea is currently under the US nuclear umbrella of protection, it could easily break away and try to develop its own nuclear weapons if necessary. South Korea possesses a lot of raw minerals, technology the necessary resources in order to create nuclear weapons, with reports stating that South Korea could create these weapons in one to three years if necessary. With South Korea lying directly south of fierce rival North Korea, which has been expanding its nuclear capability since 2006 they are clearly in a precarious situation, with the public overwhelmingly supporting the national acquisition of nuclear arms.

General Information

With recent polls finding that 71% of South Koreans favoured developing a domestic nuclear deterrent it has become increasingly prevalent with the matter being discussed in July's Asian Leadership Conference in Seoul. The key reason being that it would directly deter North Korea, which has defied all efforts by all parties to halt its nuclear arms programs. Acquiring these nuclear weapons would not be a violation of international law, only for members of the NPT, and given that South Korea could easily exit this in good faith, they would not be breaking international law. However, this withdrawal could be followed by a Japanese, which would greatly alarm China who would strongly oppose this step. Another key argument for Seoul's nuclear armament is the possibility of the US backing down if faced with a truly nuclear North Korea. Therefore, South Korean nuclearization would also lower risks for the US. It has also been questioned by many American experts whether the US would actually provide nuclear retaliation against North Korea should South Korea be attacked, making many South Koreans call for their own nuclear weapons to ensure this protection. Furthermore, given that North Korea has become more aggressive with them launching a short-range ballistic missile towards its eastern waters after flying fighter jets near the border with South Korea in October 2022, this tension has been exacerbated, causing further calls for nuclear weapons.

South Korea clearly has the capabilities to independently create atomic arms, with the ability to create 4,000 nuclear weapons units as well as possessing uranium enrichment technologies. Although the timescale of this has been debated, it is agreed that the production of this would be relatively easy and with political will could be carried out relatively quickly.

However, despite this discussion the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent is currently not on the national political agenda. Critics have stated that South Korea has a stronger military than North Korea, with them spending more than 10 times on defence than North Korea meaning there is currently no need for nuclear weapons. Furthermore, this would also be incredibly expensive, costing the Korean taxpayer billions and diverting enormous funding from South Korea's defence budget.

UN Involvement

Whilst the UN has not been directly involved in the issue of potential nuclear arms in South Korea, one very important treaty was passed on the matter of nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW), which aimed to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination was adopted by the Conference in 2017 and was ratified entering force in early 2021. This is made up of a set of prohibitions including undertakings not to develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. However, none of the P5 and South Korea have yet ratified the TPNW.

Further Reading

- Wikipedia: South Korea and Weapons of Mass Destruction
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea_and_weapons_of_mass_destruction#:~:text=South%20Korea%20does%20not%20have,W80%20and%20W84%20nuclear%20warheads.
- Foreign Policy: The US Will Trade Seattle for Seoul
 - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/17/south-korea-nuclear-weapons-deterrence-france-cold-war-north-korea-threat/>
- Asia Times: The Pros and Cons of a nuclear South Korea
 - <https://asiatimes.com/2022/07/the-pros-and-cons-of-a-nuclear-south-korea/>
- Council on Foreign Relations: The Evolution of South Korea's Nuclear Weapons Policy Debate
 - <https://www.cfr.org/blog/evolution-south-koreas-nuclear-weapons-policy-debate>