# 4 DECADES OF RECKONING WITH NORTH KOREA’S NUCLEAR THREAT – AND COUNTING



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## PETER HAYES

## OCTOBER 30, 2022

## INTRODUCTION

Peter Hayes argues that **"**going nuclear will not help South Korea deal with the threat posed by its northern neighbor."

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Banner image: two scorpions fighting in a bottle, created at AI image generator www.craiyon.com

## II. NAPSNET BLUE PETER ESSAY BY PETER HAYES

## 4 DECADES OF RECKONING WITH NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR THREAT – AND COUNTING

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What to do about North Korea's nuclear armament is an urgent question that Seoul and its partners must answer even as global and regional strategic circumstances change rapidly due to the pandemic, the Ukraine war, and most especially, the unravelling of U.S. nuclear hegemony, which injects uncertainty into the strategic calculations of all the parties to the Korean conflict, but especially in Seoul and Pyongyang.

This question can only be answered by first defining the overarching, primary threat posed by North Korea's nuclear force. Undeniably, that is the prospect of the nuclear annihilation of one or both of the Koreas, with profound implications for ever reunifying the Korean nation. National survival is the penultimate security goal of every state, and South Korea is no exception.

It follows that South Korea must embark on a long game that simultaneously minimizes the risk of nuclear war in the short, medium, and long term, while strengthening the political-diplomatic, economic, technological, military, cultural, and ecological foundations of national resilience on both sides of the DMZ. This is the metric against which demands that South Korea acquire its own nuclear weapons must be measured.

The essence of this challenge is that South Korea should do everything within its power to minimize the North Korean leadership's proclivity to ever use nuclear weapons while creating enabling

conditions that make it possible for North Korea to reduce and eventually abandon its nuclear weapons.

South Korean proponents of nuclear weapons advocate many different ways to achieve nuclear weapons status in order to match Pyongyang's expanding capabilities and reduce the risk of North Korean nuclear use. For some, pursuing nuclear weapons is only a threat aimed at prompting China to coerce North Korea to become more compliant and cooperative with the international community's demands. For others, it's a way for South Korea's tail to wag the U.S. super-dog to reinforce the United States' nuclear reassurance via extended deterrence so that South Korea can evade the entanglement-abandonment dilemma that is imposed on it by its dependent, junior ally status.

For yet others it's a way to confront North Korea, Japan, and China with South Korea's own, independent nuclear forces on the French or British model, perhaps coordinated with the United States, but no longer subordinated to U.S. command over the decision on when and how to project nuclear threat and/or use nuclear weapons. I guess that there may even be some nationalist outliers on the left and the right in Seoul who also want nuclear arms to keep the United States over the horizon, perhaps as a nuclear-armed neutral state projecting threat in all directions, *tous azimuts* as the French would have it.

Ironically, few South Korean nuclear proponents have explored the most realistic nuclear-sharing option, which is to become a nuclear-delivery state like Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, or Turkey on the NATO model. These states are NPT non-nuclear weapons states today but plan to become nuclear-armed tomorrow should a war begin – at which time the United States may transfer nuclear weapons to their delivery platforms (fighter-bombers). Such an arrangement would be similar to the facilitative role South Korean military units served when U.S. tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in Korea – for example, loading nuclear warheads onto nuclear artillery tubes was a South Korean task.

Today, even in the improbable event that the U.S. executive branch obtains congressional approval to replicate the NATO arrangement with South Korea, it's legally and politically impossible for the United States to do so without transgressing its Article 1 NPT obligations to not transfer nuclear weapons to a NPT non-nuclear weapons state. Doing so may also lead to Japanese demands for co-equal treatment, and could mean the abandonment of the demand that North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. Of course, the United States would still decide if and when to use nuclear weapons in this arrangement.

All of these South Korean nuclear proliferation proposals are fundamentally flawed. The first flaw is that they fail to view the world through Kim Jong Un's strategic prism.

If the overarching goal is to deter North Korean first use of nuclear weapons, then one must ask: Who is Kim more likely to find poses a credible, countervailing *retaliatory* threat to his possible nuclear first use, a response that would lead to his own demise along with North Korea state – presumably an undesirable outcome – the United States or South Korea?

The United States is preparing for, as President Joe Biden put it, an "Armageddon"-like response if Russian President Vladimir Putin escalates to nuclear war. It is equipped with an invulnerable submarine retaliatory force as well as hundreds of land-based ICBMs and scores of nuclear-armed bombers and is also the only state to ever use nuclear weapons in war.

Compare that to a proliferating South Korea, which would take years to make and test its own nuclear warheads and nuclear-capable missiles and construct a nuclear command, control, and

communications system – and throughout that period would be vulnerable to North Korean nuclear attack.

Assuredly, the United States, even a post-hegemonic, wobbly United States, is more likely to pose an assured retaliatory strike that would stay Kim's finger from ever pushing the button. But for the sake of argument, let's assume that South Korea could achieve a sufficiently credible retaliatory force to make Kim think more than twice before using nuclear strike orders.

Then one must ask South Korean nuclear proliferation proponents: Who would Kim Jong Un think is more likely to launch a *pre-emptive* strike aimed at decapitating him and his forces, in turn prompting him to use his own nuclear weapons first?

South Korea is constructing an already potent conventional offensive force intended to achieve this objective, but not yet one that is nuclear-armed. The South Korean president is cultivating an intense anti-Pyongyang narrative and already publicly committed to making a pre-emptive "decapitation" strike on Kim Jong Un himself should he decide to do so – but Seoul is not equipped with independent satellite and other intelligence capabilities able to monitor the disposition of North Korean military and nuclear forces in real time for targeting and damage assessment, let alone Kim's current location. As a result, in a South Korean pre-emptive strike, not one or two but many sites would have to be hit with nuclear sledgehammers to "decapitate" North Korea.

Meanwhile, the United States is historically concerned about escalation control and the risks posed by North Korea not only to South Korea and Japan but also to the United States, and is already capable of pre-emptively attacking North Korea should it choose to do so. The U.S. military is able to focus a vast array of intelligence systems on North Korea and ascertain Kim's location in a nuclear crisis to precisely target nuclear weapons onto the North's nuclear command posts, but like South Korea, the U.S. is still unlikely to know Kim's exact whereabouts on any given day

From North Korea's perspective, the risk of pre-emptive attack by the United States or South Korea is composed of two parts: capability and resolve, which can be read as intention in the immediate moment. The U.S. pre-emptive threat is a known quantity to Pyongyang over six decades since a U.S. nuclear threat was first made in the Korean War, reinforced by U.S. nuclear deployments in Korea starting in 1958. The United States has immensely more nuclear-pre-emptive capability than South Korea could ever muster, but the South presents a decision-maker more likely to, in the current lingo in Seoul, "proactively" escalate than the U.S. president. That, when combined with even a small and primitive nuclear offensive capability, constitutes a far greater – and new – risk to Kim and thereby to the entire North Korean regime. (For a more complete examination of the escalation risks facing Kim Jong Un, see this analysis by Daryl Press).

Thus, far from stabilizing the peninsula, a nuclear-armed South Korea would increase the risk that Kim would escalate early and all-out in order to avoid decapitation by Seoul on the brink of war. South Korea's nuclear armament will needlessly increase the risk of nuclear attack by the North and put the entire Korean nation at greater risk of nuclear annihilation. This, to put it mildly, is strategically imprudent.

The second flaw is that these proliferation proponents fail to view the world from a U.S. perspective. The last thing Americans want – at least so long as Donald Trump is not in the Oval Office – is for South Korea to hand Kim Jong Un the perfect excuse to accelerate his nuclear armament and for China and Russia to lift all their restraints on North Korea. Kim's basic lesson from the Ukraine war is that nuclear weapons have not enabled Russia to attack and occupy a small neighboring state. Throwing down a South Korean nuclear gauntlet would be a huge own goal in Seoul's international competition with North Korea. Also, as sure as day follows night, if South Korea goes nuclear, so will

Japan, at which point any prospect of Chinese cooperation to influence and moderate North Korea's nuclear weapons choices goes out the window.

And it's not only the future of Korea that is at stake. There are scores of pathways to limited and all-out nuclear war in Northeast Asia, many of which originate in Korea but would be increased dramatically by South Korean nuclear proliferation. Increasing the regional and global risk of nuclear war for Seoul's allies, partners, and third parties will damage South Korea's security, diplomacy, trade, and investment relations in ways that further reduce its own security. It would destroy Seoul's aspiration to contribute to global and regional security and would trash its reputation to be a responsible middle power committed to creating global and regional public goods.

The third flaw is that proliferation proponents apparently embrace an unrealistic belief that nuclear war can be controlled, fought, and survived in Korea. This illusion of control is an intrinsic aspect of nuclear warfare. That the nuclear-armed states share this illusion is no reason for South Koreans to follow suit. In fact, given how much nuclear threat is already in the air in Korea, it is good reason for extreme caution.

Given the short delivery and even shorter decision timelines in Korea on the one hand, and the respective strategic postures and asymmetries of capabilities of the two Koreas on the other, the political imperative to dominate the inter-Korean "balance of resolve" likely will lead to early first use by one of two nuclear-armed Koreas in what John On-Fat Wong called "mutual probable destruction" in his prescient 1982 study. The idea that "strategic stability" will arise in Korea from the threat of mutual annihilation is as absurd as the notion that two scorpions put in a bottle will not fight and when they do, the bottle itself – the Korean nation – will not shatter into tiny shards strewn over smoking, radiating ruin.

The fourth flaw is that, strangely, these proponents have given up on winning the long game, that is, a final reckoning with North Korea that leads to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Their end-game appears to be either endless nuclear standoff in the peninsula underpinned by the faith that North Korea will collapse and go away, or nuclear war, which South Korea will somehow survive to rise from the ashes.

It took four decades of stop-start, slow motion proliferation for North Korea to arm itself with nuclear weapons. There were many moments when that outcome could have been avoided but were not because, like grasping a nettle, doing so entailed making painful choices.

North Korea survives not because of its nuclear weapons but because it inhabits geostrategic space created by the intersecting force fields of the four great powers of East Asia: the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. The eventual fate of the North Korean regime and its nuclear weapons program now rests on how this great power system evolves, especially the China-U.S. and China-Japan relationships. If the United States and China wrestle each other to the ground, then the space enjoyed by North Korea may expand, especially if Russia is weakened by the Ukraine war and its aftermath. Conversely, if the United States and China come to a strategic reconciliation over the coming decades, the space afforded to North Korea will contract.

This fundamental strategic location presents Kim Jong Un with massive uncertainty and a vast array of strategic challenges. No one, not even Kim himself, knows how he will make the hard choices that he cannot avoid. What is clear, however, is that minimizing the risk that he will use nuclear weapons demands that South Korea and its partners find ways to shape his perceived options as he addresses these challenges.

In turn, the first and most important task is to reduce Kim's fear of decapitation in the various

contingencies that could erupt in Korea. The simplest, cheapest, and most effective way to achieve this effect is for the U.S. president to restore a working relationship with Kim. After Trump, nothing less than presidential-level contact suffices in (to use Gregory Henderson's memorable phrase) the vortex of Korean political culture, especially in corporatist North Korea.

For South Korea, then, a constructive first step would be for the Presidential Office to ask Biden to propose to Kim Jong Un that the United States and North Korea set up a bilateral, presidential-level hotline by developing an open-source, ultra-modern digital link such as CATALINK now under study in the United States and Europe.

From there, many incremental steps to reduce nuclear risk in Korea are plausible and have been developed in detail but now sit on a dusty shelf. South Korea's key task is to update the roadmap of related choices that must be made by the key parties under the new global and regional strategic flux, this time, without failure. The road to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula is now long – possibly as long as it took for North Korea to arm itself with nuclear weapons.

But with skill and fortitude, the risk that one or more of the nuclear-armed parties to the Korean conflict will lose their strategic minds and decide to use nuclear weapons can be reduced to a remote prospect until, finally, it is eliminated.

## III. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSE

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