

The Coming Arms Race on the Korean Peninsula [Op-Ed]

Lieutenant General (R) CHUN, In-Bum January 12, 2017



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(Newswire.net -- January 12, 2017) -- On 9 Sep 2016, North Korea detonated its fifth nuclear device. This event led to a frenzy for solutions to the dangers confronting the South Korean people. One of these solutions was the notion of nuclear weapons for the

Republic of Korea (ROK).

Since the 1970s, there have been ongoing discussions regarding South Korea arming itself with nuclear weapons. Most who advocated for such an option did so because they wanted an ultimate weapon that would guarantee the security of the South Korean people, who are surrounded by several large and powerful nations, in addition to the threat from North Korea.

With North Korea's continued testing of nuclear devices, as well as the large number of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction and conventional artillery within range of Seoul, fears for security have steadily increased in the South.

South Korea has maintained its policy of denuclearization and has been a signatory of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since 1975. The US-ROK alliance provided a military deterrence against the North Korean threat. All this has been challenged with the real fact that North Korea now poses a nuclear threat.

Influential thinkers, journalists, politicians and other various opinion leaders in South Korea have advocated withdrawal from the NPT. Polls initially showed a 68% support for withdrawal. It is certainly safe to assume that these supporters include traditional Korean conservatives who are the staunchest supporters of the US-ROK alliance. An initial conclusion must be that the assurances provided by the U.S. concerning extended deterrence are insufficient to reassure the Korean public from this new threat from North Korea.

Then, when the U.S. media reported that Presidential Candidate Trump had implied or supported the idea of Japan and South Korea having their own nuclear weapons, it made these nuclear advocates in South Korea more eager than ever before to make their case. Clarifications from the Trump camp have fallen on deaf ears.

Nuclear weapons advocates state, primarily, by having nuclear weapons it evens out the military imbalance between the North and South. Secondly, it provides the best deterrence for the Korean people. Third, it is economically efficient and will save on defense spending. And, finally, in the future, when negotiating with the North Koreans, it will put the North and South on equal footing. They do recognize the legal, technical, and diplomatic challenges, but are confident that they can all be overcome or negotiated.

However, I believe the costs of "Korean nuclear weapons" far outweigh the benefits at the current time. As long as South Korea has a strong U.S. commitment, this is sufficient for the security of the Korean people. Having said this, there must also be some robust initiatives and efforts by the U.S.—especially from the incoming Trump administration.

First, President-elect Trump must clarify his comments regarding nuclear weapons for South Korea. When he does this, he must be aware of the fact that some things do get "lost in translation," and so his statement must be crafted for the audience in a very clear way.

Second, the new Trump administration could do a lot of good by reaffirming U.S. commitments for stability in Northeast Asia. Many Koreans heard "withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea," which was probably out of context, to say the least. With the North Koreans listening closely, a strong affirmation of the US-ROK alliance is in order.

Finally, Seoul and the new Trump administration need to talk more and get connected at the hip. The nuclear issue is just one of many talking points. What would be the real consequences if South Korea actually walked the nuclear path?

What would be the realistic problems with redeploying U.S. nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula? What kind of assurances are the Koreans asking for? All these questions are basic, but we are at a time when we need to check our coordinates and frequencies.

Messaging has always been important. Mistakes always happen. "A right message in time saves nine."

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About the Author

Lieutenant General Chun served as the commander of the ROK Special Warfare Command and as the Deputy Commander for the First ROK

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Currently, [LTG\(R\) Chun](#) is conducting concurrent fellowships with Brookings Institute and the US-Korea Institute, School of Advances International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC.



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