

South Korea Must Secure Korean Version of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction)

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies and the RAND Corporation recently published a joint report estimating that North Korea will possess up to 242 nuclear weapons and dozens of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 2027. This means that North Korea will soon have a similar number of nuclear weapons as China. The era in which North Korea can make various nuclear threats against South Korea is fast approaching, going beyond North Korea's claims of 'nuclear weapons for self-defense.' North Korea may soon try to use various nuclear tactics. For example, after seizing South Korean islands in the West Sea it could make nuclear threats to prevent a counterattack, it could threaten nuclear strikes on South Korea's major cities, or it could make nuclear threats against the United States to push the United States for the withdrawal of its troops from Korea.

Chairman Kim Jong Un sees the very existence of free and affluent South Korea as a political threat to his regime. This is why he seeks to unify the Korean Peninsula under communist flag, and he considers nuclear weapons to be the most effective means to achieve this goal. If North Korea's nuclear weapons program is tolerated, South Korea's very existence will be in great danger.

In order to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, it takes the change of Chairman Kim's mind. South Korea, which does not have nuclear weapons, is powerless, but the United States and China can make this happen. However, a question arises as to how seriously the United States and China will work towards the denuclearization of North Korea. The Biden administration is expected to work towards the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of North Korea. But some in the United States have recently called for temporarily tolerating North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons while focusing on preventing it from developing the capability to attack the United States.

If this were to happen, the United States might breathe a sigh of relief, but South Korea will be left to face the North Korean nuclear threat alone. Nuclear-armed North Korea would be even more brazen. The United States may say that there is no change in its security commitment to

South Korea, yet it will not be easy for Washington to strengthen the ROK-US alliance while negotiating with Pyongyang.

China's role in changing North Korea's mind cannot be ignored. However, it is South Korea's wishful thinking to expect that China plays a role amid the current US-China strategic competition. China believes that North Korea's nuclear armaments is a way to disperse or weaken US capabilities. Therefore, if South Korea asks China to help with the nuclear problem, China may despise South Korea. China frequently invokes words such as 'patience,' 'self-restraint,' 'dialogue,' and 'empathy' with regard to the North Korean nuclear issue, which appear all well and good. But China is actually on North Korea's side.

The fierce strategic competition between the United States and China will continue for years to come, and North Korea's nuclear threat will also continue to grow. Under this unprecedentedly dire security environment, South Korea cannot escape the North Korean nuclear threat through fence-sitting appeasement. Instead, South Korea must send a clear message to North Korea.

In the Cold War era, the United States built 30,000 nuclear weapons and adopted a strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) to counter the Soviet Union's 40,000 nuclear weapons. MAD prevented the Soviet Union from using its nuclear weapons out of fear that it would also be destroyed if it precariously used nuclear weapons against the United States. MAD thus created a balance of fear between the United States and the Soviet Union, the American people did not have to lie awake at night in fear, and it allowed the Cold War to end cold.

During the Cold War that lasted for forty-some years, it was told that Soviet people had fear and respect for the United States. Just as the Soviet Union had fear and respect for the United States, it would be nice if North Korea felt the same way about South Korea. However, the North has no fear, let alone respect for the South. North Korea openly disdains South Korea by calling it a "frightened dog." To prevent an unexpected contingency on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea must at least make North Korea fear it. To this end, South Korea must create its own version of MAD. The core of the South Korean MAD should be to acquire the ability by South Korea and the United States to destroy the North Korean regime through superior means unless the North gives up its nuclear weapons.

While securing an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal has practical problems, it is possible to consider various options through the ROK-US alliance. It is worth paying attention to recent changes in the previous US views regarding the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a nuclear planning group. At a

recent virtual conference hosted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, General Curtis Scaparrotti, who served as the Commander of US Forces in Korea and Commander of US European Command, proposed the creation of a nuclear planning group for US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, including South Korea, akin to that in Europe. This recognizes that North Korea will change its mind only when South Korea and the United States have nuclear deterrent capabilities.

For peace on the Korean Peninsula, dialogue is necessary and good. However, if South Korea relies solely on dialogue while North Korea continues to exert belligerent violence through its nuclear armament, South Korea will be forced to wave the white flag. Meaningful dialogue is possible only when the North stops its violence. In order to change North Korea's mind, South Korea must pursue its own version of MAD.

* The view expressed herein was published on April 24 in the *Chosun Ilbo* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies