

Tactics against the North or Tactics for Naught? South Korea Embroiled in Debate over Tactical Nuclear Weapons Deployment

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(Tactical) Winds of Change?

ALARMED BY NORTH KOREA'S SIXTH NUCLEAR TEST ON September 3rd, South Korean citizens are quickly taking a more aggressive stance towards the regime. This is reflected in rapidly shifting public opinion supporting hardline measures such as the deployment of extra THAAD units and the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. A public poll conducted by Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI) several days after the incident found that 68.2% of 1,014 respondents were in favor of deploying tactical nuclear weapons on Korean soil to as a response to the North Korean nuclear threat. An earlier opinion poll conducted by the East Asia Institute in June showed that 67.2% of those surveyed agreed to the idea of nuclear weapons in South Korea. These results seem to indicate that animosity among the South Korean population towards the Kim Jong-un regime and its adventurist maneuvers has been brewing over the past few years.

In line with this trend, the Moon Jae-in administration stepped up security measures in response to the test by approving the deployment of 4 additional THAAD units, albeit temporarily, and working with the U.S. to revise the missile guidelines limiting the range and weight of South Korea's ballistic missiles. Still, some lawmakers, particularly opposition lawmakers, continue to decry these measures as insufficient and call for consultations with the U.S. on

the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear assets on South Korean soil. They advocate this as an effective counter-threat and potential bargaining chip against North Korea.

Tactical nuclear weapons, nearly 950 units of which were in operation in South Korea at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, were completely withdrawn from the country in December 1991 in line with the Declaration of the Denuclearization announced a month before by President Roh Tae-woo. The withdrawal also paved the way for the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula that was signed by the two Koreas the following year. Public debate over redeployment, however, was recently reignited when Yoo Seong-min, the presidential candidate for the conservative Bareun Party during the 19th election, brought up the idea at a nationally televised debate in April.

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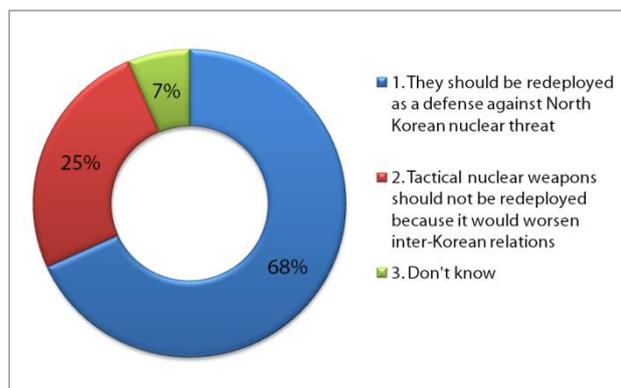
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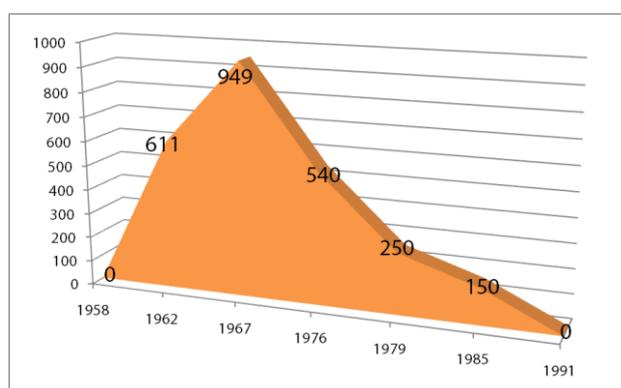


Figure 1: Which statement about tactical nuclear weapons do you agree with more?



Source: KSOI, 1,014 respondents, 2017.9.8 ~ 2017.9.9

Figure 2: Number of tactical nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea (unit: unit)



Source: Federation of American Scientists

The Opposition Party Push for Redeployment

Although the topic took a backseat to domestic issues upon President Moon's arrival in office, it quickly rose to the forefront again as North Korea conducted a new series of nuclear and missile tests demonstrating the apparent acceleration of its nuclear program. Liberty Korea Party has adopted the redeployment of the U.S. tactical nuclear arsenal on the Korean Peninsula as its party platform. This is not insignificant, as Liberty Korea Party holds 107 parliamentary seats second only to the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (121 seats).

Party floor leader Jung Woo-taek announced this new policy platform on August 16th, saying that their

decision was driven by the need to speak for the more than 64% of the population that recent polls indicated were in favor of redeployment. Elaborating on the decision, the spokesperson stated, "A nuclear balance is the only way that South Korea can defend itself; it's an eye for an eye, a nuclear weapon for a nuclear weapon." Following the announcement, the party held an open forum to discuss ways to make the idea a reality. At the forum, Chairman Hong Jun-pyo argued that redeployment had become a question of national survival now that the North Korean threat was reaching its final stages. As the leading conservative candidate in the last presidential election, he mentioned the policy as one of his campaign pledges, but the pledge was criticized as unrealistic "baloney" even within his own party at the time.

In the face of continued North Korean provocations, however, the general mood has shifted favorably towards more aggressive measures, including tactical nuclear weapons deployment. Against this backdrop, political observers note that the opposition party's move could serve as a rallying cry for its supporters as well as a timely political offensive against the president and the ruling party, both of which have been enjoying high approval ratings. The issue is so contentious that a rift exists even among President Moon's.

At the same time, Liberty Korea Party is seeking to form a coalition on this front with other opposition parties. After successfully aligning with the Bareun Party and People's Party to block the nomination of several new chief Constitutional Court justices on September 11th, Jung Woo-taek made overtures to the two parties, urging them to "make the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons a party platform and seek joint action with us."

Nuclear Sharing vs. Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Six of One, Half a Dozen of the Other

Still, both the People's Party and the Bareun Party



remain on the fence. People's Party lawmakers are sharply divided on the question and party leader Ahn Cheol-soo has yet to adopt a clear stance. Previously, he supported the denuclearization principle, but recently he has criticized President Moon for not putting all options on the table. The party's floor leader and members of the National Assembly National Defense Committee have also personally expressed favorable views towards the idea. Regardless, a majority of People's Party representatives remain either skeptical or negative. Led by Representative Chung Dong-Young, lawmakers against the redeployment argue that the idea is out of tune with the party's identity. The party leadership decided to bring its lawmakers together at a seminar on September 18th to discuss the party's position on North Korean nuclear issues, including the tactical nuclear weapons question.

Meanwhile, the Bareun Party is advocating "nuclear sharing" modeled after NATO instead of the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. The rationale behind this is that authority over the operation and use of the weapons lies solely in the hands of the U.S. forces in the latter, while the former arrangement allows the hosting country a certain degree of latitude in the use and management of nuclear weapons deployed in its territory. Representative Ha Tae-kyung, a leading proponent of this plan, drew a clear distinction between nuclear sharing and the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, pointing out that nuclear sharing could avoid unnerving China further as it does not necessarily involve the placement of nuclear weapons on South Korean soil. He also condemned Liberty Korea Party's call for redeployment as "a perilous anti-American populist hype that could undermine the ROK-US alliance."

Shin Won-sik, a retired three-star general and former vice chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, also recently endorsed the idea of nuclear sharing during an interview with a local newspaper. He argued that such a scheme would provide South Korea with a degree of authority over U.S. nuclear weapons, thus

ramping up security without actually acquiring nuclear capabilities. Meanwhile, Professor Park Hwee-rhak, a nuclear strategy expert at Kookmin University, proposed a trilateral nuclear sharing model between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. He argued that in addition to strengthening the ROK-U.S. combined deterrence posture and possibly expediting denuclearization negotiations with North Korea, the scheme would also dispel fears in South Korea and Japan of the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The assurance provided by nuclear sharing would allow them to shelve the idea of developing and possessing their own nuclear arsenal to defend against each other as well as against North Korea.

[Table 2] Party Lines on the Redeployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (as of 2017.9.18)

	Blue House Democratic Party (Ruling, 121 seats)	People's Party (40 seats)	Bareun Party (20 seats)	Liberty Korea Party (107 seats)
Position	Disapproval	Divided	NATO-style nuclear sharing	Approval
Recent moves	President Moon: Denied any possibility of redeployment in a CNN interview (9/14)	Leadership: Held forum to decide the party line (9/18)	Rep. Ha Tae-kyung: Advocated nuclear sharing (9/15)	Delegation: Visited the U.S. State Department to make the case for redeployment (9/13)

A critical blind spot of these proposals, however, is that nuclear sharing would only cover the vehicles or platforms of nuclear weapons, i.e. submarines or aircraft. It is only the original owner of the weapons, the U.S., that can actually authorize and activate their use. Research on U.S. tactical nuclear weapons



deployed in Europe consistently mentions that the weapons remain in full control of U.S. forces while the hosting governments and/or their military authorities do not have any access. Throughout the Cold War era, the U.S. never approved or accepted any mechanism or institution that could undermine its monopoly on the use of its nuclear weapons. NATO's nuclear sharing scheme is, in this regard, a bizarre compromise of a decades-long tug-of-war between the U.S. and its NATO allies in Europe.

By extension, another weakness of this argument is that it does not logically or practically allay South Korean fears of abandonment by the U.S. Having control over the vehicles that carry tactical nuclear weapons means that a country can stop its ally from hastily using weapons by forbidding use of these vehicles. However, it cannot compel its nuclear power ally to use nuclear weapons since it does not have any say over the weapons themselves.

Last but not least, it is questionable whether the U.S. has any incentive to share authority with South Korea, especially if the weapons are not placed in South Korean territory. In fact, the only thing that the nuclear arsenal NATO member states have been sharing with the U.S. is the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in their territories, meaning that the scheme, unlike what its advocates maintain, is essentially not at all different from the re-introduction of tactical nuclear weapons into South Korean territory.

Experts Warn of Huge Losses for Small Gains while (Unlikely) Advocates Raise Their Voices

Most South Korean security experts frown at the idea of redeployment, noting that it is highly unlikely that the U.S. would welcome the proposal and highlighting that even if it were to agree, redeployment would do more harm than good for East Asian regional security as well as South Korean national security. In an interview last month, former Unification Minister Lee

Jong-seok observed that while there is little point in adhering to the virtually obsolete denuclearization principle, deployment would constitute a de-facto recognition of North Korea's nuclear weapons and muddle up U.S. security strategy in East Asia, not only towards North Korea but also China, Russia, and even its closest ally Japan.

Calls for redeployment, however, have not been confined to the opposition parties. President Moon's confidant and key strategist of foreign policy and security issues during his campaign has also voiced support. After Kim Jong-un made a blustery declaration in mid-August that his next test would target the U.S. base in Guam, Park Sun-won, the former unification policy secretary for President Roh Moo-hyun, used social media to advocate for a conditional introduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons as a means of re-establishing the power balance on the Peninsula and making Kim Jong-un think twice before pushing ahead with his nuclear ambitions.

Although his views are strictly his own as he does not hold any office at the moment, Park Sun-won's blog post highlights just how controversial the issue of tactical nuclear weapons as a counter-measure against North Korea is in South Korean political circles as well as the public. Academics and policy experts also joined the debate. The Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), a research arm of the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS), released two papers under the title "A Debate: The Redeployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons" on September 13th, 2017.

Dr. Park Byung-Kwang, Chief of the Northeast Asia Research Department at INSS, argued that the denuclearization principle is essentially null and void and that tactical nuclear weapons could create a balance of terror, reducing the chances of North Korean provocations and aggression and possibly compelling the regime to come to the negotiation table. Rebutting Park's argument, INSS Research Fellow Lee Soo-hyung contended that tactical nuclear weapons



would instead serve as a catalyst for North Korea's nuclear capabilities and spur a nuclear arms race in East Asia, and that it would eventually perpetuate the division of the two Koreas.

In addition to the hot debate over the political implications of tactical nuclear weapons, another controversy surrounds their pure military value in general as well as in Korea's geopolitical circumstances in particular. Hwang Il-do, a researcher at the University of North Korean Studies, notes that tactical nuclear weapons have lost most of their military relevance, as strategic nuclear weapons can fully replace tactical nukes in terms of function and mission.

Moreover, he argues that the main targets of tactical nuclear weapons are enemies with expansive territories, i.e., the Soviet Union or China, with a view to localizing a war and limiting the theater to a 'tactical' level. In comparison, the Korean Peninsula is geographically small and there is little, if any, point in distinguishing tactical nuclear weapons from strategic nukes in case of war. As one senior U.S. military officer of the European Command reportedly said during the nuclear arsenal management inspection in 2008, tactical nuclear weapons are simply political tools that have effectively no military implications yet cost a "king's ransom."

The Blue House Digs in its Heels and the U.S. Remains Steadfast as Debate Continues

Amid the ongoing dispute, the Blue House and the ruling Democratic Party have expressed a firm opposition to the idea. As part of the effort to calm the public, first deputy chief of the National Security Office Lee Sang-chul officially stated in a press briefing at the Blue House on September 12th that the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons would constitute a breach of the principle of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula that was established in 1991. Reiterating the government's official stance, President

Moon Jae-in said in an interview with CNN on September 14th that he was not considering the option at all, emphasizing that a "nuke-for-nuke" attitude would destabilize the Korean Peninsula and could ignite a nuclear arms race across the Northeast Asian region. The statement and the interview suggest a fine-tuning of the Moon administration's position, as previous comments from the Defense and Foreign Affairs ministers were noncommittal.

Minister of Defense Song Young-moo stated during the September 4th National Defense Committee session at the National Assembly that he was willing to fully examine the option of redeployment, even in the face of clear objection from ruling party lawmakers. He backed down, however, at the National Assembly interpellation on September 12th. When asked if he thought a tactical nuclear arsenal should be brought in for the purpose of creating a "balance of terror," the minister replied that he was not considering the option at all. He denied claims that he had a serious discussion with U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis on the subject during ministerial talks in late August, and stressed that he had simply touched upon the fact that some quarters of South Korea were calling for redeployment.

U.S. military experts have also expressed skepticism over the possibility of the redeployment. The Washington Post reported on September 4th that a number of experts, including nuclear weapons policymakers of the past administrations, had "almost universally" voiced their concern over the idea, largely due to fears of miscalculation and the potential for heightened tension on the Peninsula. The key national security figures of the current Trump administration are no exception. National security advisor H.R. McMaster said in an interview with MSNBS in early August that "If the non-proliferation regime is broken... a Northeast Asia with a nuclear armed North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia... it's bad news for everybody."

Still, those in favor of redeployment point to



apparent changes in the atmosphere in the White House in the wake of North Korea's sixth nuclear test on September 3rd. NBC quoted several sources from the White House as saying, "The administration is not ruling out moving tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea should Seoul request them." However, the same news report went on to suggest that the option appears too remote and that the remarks were aimed at urging China to put more pressure on North Korea. This view is in line with the response of the State Department to the delegation of Liberty Korea Party who recently visited the U.S. to convey South Korea's public concern over the issue. State Department officials reportedly said that they would seek measures to place more strategic assets, instead of tactical nuclear weapons, on the Peninsula in order to deter North Korean provocations.

Some observers have also cautiously called attention to official statements from the White House and the State Department that conveyed a slightly different tone. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Logan, a Pentagon spokesman, in an interview with Voice of America, firmly declined to comment on the department's stance on redeployment, saying that it would be "inappropriate" to talk about it in detail at the moment. Instead, he stated that the Pentagon continues to support South Korean and Japanese efforts to strengthen their defense capabilities in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

The VOA interpreted this response as rather vague in comparison with the answer to the same question five years ago, when Defense Department spokesperson and Lieutenant Colonel Catherine Wilkinson affirmed that the department did not plan or intend to bring tactical nuclear weapons back into the East Asian theater. Their statement was echoed by Victoria Nuland, the spokesperson of the State Department at the time. The subtle nuances in the more recent statement by Lieutenant Colonel Logan could possibly lend credence to recent reports that the Trump administration has been seriously considering redeployment as one of its options. Although it seems

like a remote possibility at the moment, North Korea's continued and relentless provocations might drastically alter the calculations of President Trump, and for that matter, those of President Moon as well. ■

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