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‘Hardliners argue that South Korea should have its own nuclear weapons’

South Korean public support for going nuclear is increasing. Moon Chung-in on the country’s nuclear debate and its relations with the US and Japan

President Yoon Suk-Yeol sparked the debate this year on whether South Korea should build a nuclear arsenal of its own. Why is Seoul discussing nuclear armament again?

The primary reason is North Korea's more assertive, even provocative behaviour. North Korea has undertaken almost 40 ballistic missile tests this year with 72 rounds since Yoon Suk-Yeol took office. Moreover, in September last year, North Korea changed its nuclear doctrine. In the past, North Korea adhered to the ‘no first use principle’. But after the Ukrainian war, Pyongyang alluded to a second mission: a pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons for conventional warfare. The government also announced that it is deploying tactical nuclear weapons along the front line. A growing number of mostly conservative South Koreans argue that the US-American nuclear umbrella is not credible – especially due to past experiences with Donald Trump. The US would not sacrifice Los Angeles or Hawaii for the protection of Seoul. They are calling for reassurance in the form of redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea, or at least NATO-style nuclear sharing with the United States. However, the US is opposed to both. Hardliners therefore argue that South Korea should have its own nuclear weapons. While attending the World Economic Forum in late January, Yoon repudiated the idea to develop nuclear weapons and said that South Korea will abide by the Non-Proliferation-Treaty regime. However, the public support for going nuclear increased from 60 to 80 per cent, a very frightening situation. Fortunately, in April this year, when Yoon visited Washington, he and Biden adopted the Washington Declaration which strengthened the existing nuclear-extended deterrence. I hope the declaration will dampen public sentiment in favour of an independent nuclear path.

You warn of a domino effect in Northeast Asia: if South Korea goes nuclear, other countries would follow, especially Japan. Given the decision of Yoon Suk-Yeol's government to pay compensation to forced labour workers exploited under Japanese colonial rule, is a closer cooperation with Japan possible?

With the North Korean nuclear threat and a Chinese threat on the rise, it is essential for South Korea to strengthen its military alliance with the US. But the Yoon government thinks that this is not enough: Japan should be *included* in that framework. That is why Yoon has been calling for a stronger trilateral military cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul – particularly with regard to missile defence information sharing on the North Korean missile threat.

President Yoon's position is simple and straightforward: the past is important, but the present and the future are more important, and we should not hold the present and future hostage to the historical past. He proposed a third-party compensation for victims of forced labour mobilisation, in which the money raised from South Korean companies that became very successful after getting financial support from Japan will be used as a compensation fund for the victims and their families. South Korea is divided about this plan. Conservatives support the idea because they see North Korea and China as more urgent issues and for the sake of security cooperation, Seoul should resolve the forced labour issue through the third-party compensation formula. However, the majority of South Korean citizens strongly oppose it, arguing that any compensation or reparation that is not born by Japanese firms responsible for forced mobilisation is meaningless. Which would be a sign that Japan is not repenting of its historical past. The opposition party and civil society also put the focus on the individual victims whose voices should be heard. Although Yoon claims that the forced labour case is now resolved, the issue will remain a major political burden clouding the improvement of Japan-South Korean relations.

The most important partner for both South Korea and Japan is the US. Washington is engaging the Japanese government in the Security Dialogue, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with Australia and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with India and Australia. Some even advocate for Japan to join the trilateral security pact AUKUS between the US, Australia and the United Kingdom. Was Seoul left out?

Yes, South Korea was left out. The US government always wanted South Korea to be in the framework of the Quad, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the US, Japan, India and Australia. But the Japanese government opposed the idea of including South Korea

and suggested that if South Korea wants to be part of Quad, it should join as Quad Plus – the plus referring to the three countries South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand. The previous Moon Jae-in government rejected the Quad Plus proposal that treats South Korea as a junior. President Biden visited Seoul in May last year, immediately after Yoon's inauguration. The new president is known to have proposed the idea of joining Quad, but Biden did not respond, as Japan remains opposed. So, the Yoon government is now emphasising trilateral cooperation involving the US, Japan and South Korea.

Therefore, the Camp David meeting on 18 August will be diplomatically important. It will be the first time that three leaders from the US, South Korea and Japan are having a separate summit meeting. Biden, Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will be discussing a wide range of issues such as extended deterrence against North Korea, intelligence sharing on North Korean missile threats and the trilateral military cooperation within the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Economic security, especially concerning the supply chain of the semiconductor industry, will be another salient agenda for discussion. The three leaders will also try to come up with common strategies on how to cope with China's rise. The Camp David summit is expected to produce a diplomatic document, such as the Camp David Declaration, that will serve as a watershed moment in trilateral security cooperation.

All these military alliances are aimed against the rise of China. What is the position of the South Korean government towards containing Beijing?

Yoon's government has formally adopted its Indo-Pacific strategy: it is a duplication of the American strategy, although it emphasises its 'inclusive nature'. Seoul is going along with Washington, Tokyo and Delhi in an attempt to contain China. But the Yoon government has been very cautious in making this public. While South Korea joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity launched by Biden in May this year and all kinds of other US-cantered activities, the government kept telling Beijing that it does not want to isolate or exclude China and that Seoul wants to have healthy relations with Beijing. This is a tough balancing act. For example, Yoon made it very clear that South Korea does not want any change of the status quo in the Taiwan Straits by force. The Chinese government was offended and formerly protested. The problem for South Korea is that we are economically too dependent on China — any deterioration in relations will have direct consequences for the economy. Not to forget that Beijing plays a very important role in Korean security and is able

to put indirect pressure on Seoul by providing arms and oil to Pyongyang.

Many politicians and former members of the military in the US are warning of a war with China. How do you assess the likelihood of an armed conflict in East Asia?

The United States has become a factory of rumours about Chinese aggressive behaviour. They have been manufactured by Washington think tanks and organisations associated with the US military-industrial complex so that they can secure a higher defence budget and acquire more weapons. Such a trend is not desirable. China is a rational actor. I doubt China would invade Taiwan as it would be too costly. It would also go against China's diplomacy philosophy: Xi Jinping has always been proposing win-win diplomacy. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would lead to a lose-lose outcome.

Xi is walking on a tight rope when it comes to national pride. Even though China is a one-party dominated authoritarian state, Xi cannot rule without public support. Through the Taiwan issue, he can build legitimacy. If the US interferes with the core interests of China, Beijing could respond militarily. However, identity is not the only dimension to consider. If China invades Taiwan and destroys the Taiwanese economy, which is closely linked to and intertwined with China's economy, this would also mean an economic disaster at home that he cannot afford.

China and Russia intend to break up what they call the Western-dominated world order, the Russian war against Ukraine is one of the centres of the attempt to reshuffle geopolitics. The discussion in Seoul is ongoing about whether to provide munition to the Ukrainian army. Does this imply that Seoul is seeking a new global role?

The South Korean government has been somewhat dubious. The law does not allow South Korea to provide lethal weapons to countries in an armed conflict. The official position is that the country provides humanitarian and economic assistance and will help with the post-war reconstruction, all while it joins international sanctions against Russia. The New York Times however leaked that the government provided ammunition to Ukraine through the United States. Washington asked Seoul to loan out about half a million rounds of ammunition for 155 mm howitzers, which were then given to Ukraine. Obviously, the opposition parties are now pounding on the government. Later, it was revealed that all of those half a million rounds of ammunition were taken out of the national wartime reserve, and now the National Assembly is investigating.

The Yoon government has been seeking the status of 'global pivot state' through value diplomacy. It was under this diplomatic initiative that the government has been actively engaging in global affairs. Its assistance to Ukraine was also motivated by this. In doing so, the government has been emphasising the importance of cooperation with like-minded countries that share common values. On the one hand, it has been expanding the scope of global engagement under value diplomacy. On the other hand, it has joined the US and Japan in shaping the polarised world.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele and Julika Luisa Enbergs.



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