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Can ROK Nuclearize Without International Support?

By Alvin Chew

SYNOPSIS

If South Korea decides to develop nuclear weapons, it will face significant resistance from the international community. Is it worthwhile for it to tread the same path as its northern neighbour?

COMMENTARY

President Yoon Suk-yeol of the Republic of Korea (ROK) recently remarked that his country will consider developing nuclear weapons to counter the growing nuclear threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

For close to 70 years, ROK has upheld its model image as the developed nation that had thrived while its northern neighbour had languished in poverty. However, the strategic landscape changed significantly in 2022 when DPRK declared that it had successfully developed nuclear weapons and that their delivery platforms, both tactical and strategic, were capable of striking ROK as well as distances across the Pacific Ocean.

The tensions on the Korean peninsula and the need to neutralise the threat posed by DPRK have coerced South Korea into reviving its nuclear weapons policy. However, going 'nuke' would invite sanctions, impact adversely on its economy, and could reduce it to an impoverished state. It would lose its 'Global Korea' image and become an international pariah. Unlike its northern neighbour, ROK has much more to lose in building a nuclear arsenal.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

South Korea is a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which forbids a Non-Nuclear Weapons State (NNWS) to acquire or develop

any nuclear weapon. While Article 10 of the NPT allows members to withdraw from the treaty, it should be noted that this would involve a very long-drawn process.

The DPRK's experience in this is instructive. It had officially written to the United Nations Security Council to signal its intention to withdraw from the NPT back in 1993, but it effectively left the regime only in 2003, and only after it had been censured for several non-compliances with its safeguards commitments.

Regardless of any justifiable reasons on grounds of national security and sovereignty, ROK's withdrawal from the cornerstone treaty will definitely face international condemnation and a barrage of economic sanctions. Its civilian nuclear industry is highly integrated with several of its international conglomerates such as Hyundai and Samsung. It emerged as a global market player in 2009 when it first clinched a deal to export nuclear reactors to the United Arab Emirates. Its nuclear sector, which has a global presence, will almost certainly face isolation from the Nuclear Suppliers Group – a regime founded by NPT signatories to control the export of nuclear equipment and technology.

While the ROK has the expertise to develop nuclear weapons, its ability to do so will be severely hampered by opposition from the international community. Its requests to build a spent fuel reprocessing facility have been turned down by the US and France repeatedly. In 2004, when ROK enriched uranium to 77 per cent (which was below weapons grade) by laser enrichment, it was considered a serious violation of its safeguards commitments. Neither ROK, nor any of the NNWS signatories to the NPT, will be allowed concessions to develop nuclear weapons.

The US Nuclear Umbrella

The US had previously stationed troops at the Demilitarised Zone and placed tactical nuclear missiles on the Korean peninsula. In 1991, it withdrew these missiles from the peninsula as part of a disarmament deal with the Soviet Union. However, the ROK is included under the US nuclear umbrella, which provides security assurances that the US will defend its non-nuclear allies.

This US-ROK understanding was established after the Korean War, in an extended non-proliferation effort to deter the ROK from acquiring its own nuclear weapons. Furthermore, having a nuclear capable ROK would only incite an arms race with the DPRK and coerced it into developing its own nuclear weapons – which it eventually did.

During the Trump administration, the US had considered withdrawing its troops from ROK, citing that the latter was capable of defending itself with its more advanced military forces, and the need to de-escalate military tensions on the Korean peninsula. This compounded further the insecurity of the ROK.

With the current landscape of a belligerent and nuclearized DPRK, the US nuclear umbrella remains relevant and very much intact, and both the US and ROK have stepped up joint military drills and defence cooperation. In recent years, the US has demonstrated its commitment to the defence of its ally by bolstering conventional

military activities and support, even though the adversary possesses nuclear weapons.

President Yoon's remarks that his country would consider developing nuclear weapons and rely less on the US, if it does eventuate, will compromise the effectiveness of the US nuclear umbrella, and lead to a US military withdrawal from the Korean peninsula eventually. The Korean peninsula would then be transformed into two opposing fortresses, each packed with nuclear silos isolated from the rest of the world. If the ROK should go down this path, it will be embarking on an expensive nuclear arms race that will eventually cripple its economy.

Conclusion

The ROK's announcement that it is considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons to counter the DPRK's military provocations only exposes the flaw that its military strategy still resides within the tit for tat paradigm.

Nuclear diplomacy is critically important, particularly when the world is working towards the vision of disarmament. The international community must persevere in its efforts to bring DPRK back to the negotiating table. On the other hand, for ROK to develop nuclear weapons as a deterrence will only bring about a costly nuclear arms race thereby intensifying tensions on the Korean peninsula. I believe President Yoon is wise enough not to be provoked into taking the nuclear path.

The ROK has achieved success as a developed country through its collaboration with, and the support of the international community. As such, it is accountable to the international community. Any plan to acquire nuclear weapons will not solely be a national decision.

Nuclear developments on the Korean peninsula have always featured as a long-standing agenda in NPT meetings. This time round, efforts will not just be on disarming DPRK but also on preventing ROK from going down the nuclear path.

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