The Debate

Should the US Consider Redeploying Tactical Nukes in South Korea?

By Seongwhun Cheon

For more than two decades now, South Koreans have watched as negotiations repeatedly failed to end North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons. Redeploying US tactical nukes would change the strategic dynamics entirely and at last enable a breakthrough.

By Peter Hayes

Frustration at North Korea fuelled a recent attempt by US lawmakers to secure support to redeploy US nukes in South Korea. But the plan is out of touch with political and military realities, it is unworkable in practice, and it runs the grave risk of making the situation worse.
Loose Lips Sink Ships, So Cut the Nuke Talk

By Peter Hayes

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE Trent Franks and his fellow Republicans on the US House Armed Services Committee tried to throw a cat among the pigeons on May 11 by amending a defense authorization bill to require the Pentagon to consider US options to redeploy “non-strategic” (that is, tactical and theater) nuclear weapons — plus some extra conventional forces for good measure — in the Asia-Pacific region, apparently with South Korea in mind.¹

The ostensible reason for such redeployment is to pressure China to reduce its support for nuclear-armed North Korea, and to strengthen US alliances facing the North Korean nuclear threat.

“It’s become time for us as a nation to look to our deterrent and our ability to take care of ourselves and work with our allies to do everything we can to deter and to be able to defend ourselves against any future belligerence or threats from North Korea,” said Franks.

However, this cat was dead even before it hit the ground. Not only did the Administration announce on May 16 that it had no plans to redeploy nuclear weapons, this not being necessary to defend US allies against North Korea’s conventional or nuclear threat, but South Korean officials and its “guided” media also rejected the idea as provocative and unnecessary.²

Nonetheless, the amendment was followed on June 4 by an announcement by National Assembly member Chung Mong-joon of the ruling Saenuri Party that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons to match North Korea’s nuclear threat. Said Chung, “Even if [South Korea] does not possess its own nuclear weapons immediately, it should secure the capability to possess them.”³

Ironically, Chung also pledged to reconsider South Korea’s plan to take back wartime operational command of its forces in 2015 from the US, apparently unaware of the complications that would result from American command of Korean troops armed with indigenous nuclear weapons — a nightmare that no American president could countenance.

These statements appear to have been prompted by North Korea’s nuclear rhetoric, combined with frustration about China’s backing of the new Kim Jong Un regime. But these emotional reactions are simply out of touch with political and military realities. Let’s evaluate their soundness, leaving aside the question of whether these are simply political stunts aimed at domestic constituencies.

First, Franks is unclear on US tactical nuclear weapons themselves. The only tactical nuclear weapons remaining in the US arsenal are 200-odd air-gravity B-61 bombs deployed in NATO countries, and they have no conceivable military use.⁴ No one believes that the US is about to make new nuclear weapons, let alone tactical nuclear weapons. Does Franks mean to move these B-61 bombs to South Korea?

Franks is also apparently unaware that the last time the US deployed nuclear weapons, a significant fraction of US forces in Korea were dedicated to securing and handling the weapons.⁵ He seems ignorant of the fact that the US Army led the bureaucratic push inside the Pentagon to remove the weapons because they were militarily
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The American military are pushing their Korean counterparts to articulate a non-nuclear and conventional deterrent strategy that is “proactive” without being provocative. They are constantly explaining to South Korean Ministry of National Defense and security officials, especially in the Extended Deterrence Committee, that the US has their back.

useless and a distraction from the primary mission — to deter and defeat North Korean forces. In addition to the personnel, nuclear weapons in Korea would necessitate constructing new shelters and security perimeters. Franks is silent on how many millions of dollars this would divert from the conventional military budget to actually defend the South.

He seems to forget that in the good old days of planning for nuclear war in Korea, from about 1960 up until about 1990, US nuclear war plans would have resulted in the release of vast quantities of radioactive debris that would have wafted downwind towards large populations of the very Koreans it was defending.6

He seems to be uninformed that redeploying nuclear weapons would entail sharing such weapons or related knowledge, and that would require Congress to pass a nuclear Program of Cooperation under the US Atomic Energy Act, without which the deployment would be illegal.7 Congress is unlikely to even consider such a move.

He also seems to misunderstand China’s views of the peril posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons, including the possibility that they are aimed at China as well as the US and its allies. He doesn’t understand Beijing’s view that China has little credible power to force North Korea to capitulate to US demands, and even less ability to deliver a United States willing to negotiate with the North on terms acceptable to Pyongyang, not least because of congressional resistance from members like Franks.

Finally, Franks seems unaware that a Republican president removed the weapons in 1991 for all these reasons and more — their presence in South Korea sent the wrong message: that nuclear weapons in Korea were necessary in order to defend Korea. When they were removed, the sky did not fall in. In fact, after this unilateral US action to reshape the geo-strategic environment in East Asia, rapid progress was made on many fronts in negotiating a North Korean nuclear freeze, which kept the North’s proliferation campaign in slow motion and ensured that Pyongyang’s arsenal is militarily useless today, rather than a well-tested, relatively large nuclear force like that of Pakistan or India acquired over similar time frames.

As to Chung Mong-joon, like Trent Franks, he seems to be a throwback to the Cold War. The last time South Korea tried to develop an independent nuclear force, under President Park Chung-hee from 1969–1980, the net result was enduring damage to the US-South Korea alliance. As Professor Chung-in Moon and I wrote in 2011 of today’s South Korean nuclear weapons proponents, “[i]f successful, they would enter the same cul de sac as Park — with the additional risk of prompting an inter-Korean nuclear arms race and an unstable nuclear standoff with North Korea constantly tilting towards pre-emption on both sides.”8

Likely outcomes of repositioning nuclear weapons in South Korea include possible rupture of the South Korean security alliance with the US, international sanctions, diplomatic setbacks, trade losses, possible follow-on effects on Japan’s non-nuclear commitments, extraordinarily dangerous nuclear threats and even its possible first use of nuclear weapons, is to prosecute a prompt, massive conventional military campaign to remove the leadership.

By contrast, calling for the re-deployment of nuclear weapons or the development of South Korean nuclear weapons is to face an uncertain future looking backwards, not a forward-looking, potent call-to-arms in the 21st century.

Indeed, to the extent that they inflame an already tense situation in Korea, these statements recall an old adage with particular resonance to South Koreans still living with the loss of the naval corvette Chosun and its crew, viz: “Loose Lips Sink Ships.”

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6 The relatively greater vulnerability of South Korea to Soviet and Chinese nuclear attack, and the relative duplicity of potential South Korean nuclear weapons in a variety of war scenarios relative to the use of conventional forces was also analyzed in another US military unclassified research report published five months before the CIA report. See B. Jack et al, The South Korea Case: A Nuclear Weapons Program Embedded in an Environment of Great Power Concerns, Volume II, Regional Rivals and Nuclear Responses, Panheuristics Final Report to US Defense Nuclear Agency, DNA 001-77-C-0052, Feb. 28, 1976, pp. 1185 to 1195, at http://nautilus.org/publications/essays/naples/net/reports/panheuristics_ROK_Regional_Rivals
8 P Hayes and C.I. Moon, “Park Chung Hae, the CIA & the Bomb,” GlobalAsia, September 2011, at: www.globalasia.org/V03_3_Feb_2011/Peter_Hayes&Chung-in_Moon.html