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.
The Debate: Cheon

A Tactical Step That Makes Sense for South Korea

By Seongwhun Cheon

TWENTY-ONE YEARS HAVE PASSED since the South Korean public first became aware of the North Korean nuclear problem. Since 1991, the once unfamiliar word “nuclear” has become a part of the daily lives of ordinary South Koreans. Over this time, a baby could have been born, grown up and become an adult while a series of efforts have been made to dissuade North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, all to no avail.

Unilateral measures were taken, such as South Korean President Roh Tae-woo’s denuclearization statement and US President George H.W. Bush’s decision to withdraw all tactical nukes from South Korea in 1991. In addition, a variety of negotiations have been held — inter-Korean dialogues, US-North Korea high-level talks, the Four-Party Talks and the Six-Party Talks. Despite these efforts, North Korea has continued to develop nuclear weapons; it has tested plutonium warheads twice, catching the international community by surprise; and built an impressive uranium enrichment program, demonstrated in the large-scale explosion at the Yongbyon Nuclear Complex on December 11, 2006. A widely cited article of the New York Times cited a U.S. government source that North Korea had produced enough uranium for “several weapons.”

As a result, the North Korean nuclear problem has now arrived at a critical stage. It is a strategic issue that has implications for the future of Korea, the wider region, and the global community.

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CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

In South Korea today, the public is filled with strong emotions about the issue: a sense of futility at the time and effort invested in trying to resolve the issue for more than 20 years; frustration at the inability to persuade North Korea to give up nuclear weapons; a sense of helplessness regarding the ongoing negotiations; a sense of shame at allowing North Korea to prevail over South Korea in military terms; and a keen awareness that North Korea’s reckless provocations, backed up by its known nuclear deterrent, could lead to a crisis. Ordinary South Koreans are beginning to realize that we cannot just rely on an endless process of negotiations to make north Korea a nuclear weapons state, and that we must do something to change the status quo.

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The history of North Korea’s nuclear adventure demonstrates that this was no more than wishful thinking; in fact, it was just wrong. In the preamble of its revised Constitution this April, North Korea stated that one of the great achievements of the late Kim Jong Il was to make North Korea a nuclear weapons state. In hindsight, the so-called nuclear preparations that resulted in North Korea buying time to extract resources for its nuclear weapons programs, while the South Korea-US alliance complacently diverted its attention away from the brewing nuclear crisis.

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This shift in public sentiment has led to a public debate over alternative ways of confronting the North Korean nuclear threat. Currently, two proposals have been made, each with a similar level of public support: 1) begin an indigenous South Korean nuclear weapons program; or 2) redeploy American tactical nukes in South Korea as a counter to and a bargaining chip vis-à-vis North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

On March 2-3, 2011, a public poll was conducted by South Korean polling center Realmeter and cable TV channel tv-N, asking 1,000 people around the country about North Korea’s nuclear program. One question was whether they were for or against the reintroduction of tactical nuclear weapons. In answer, 69.1 percent said it was necessary to counter the North Korean threat, while 17.3 percent said it was not necessary for regional peace and denuclearization of North Korea. On whether South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons, 72.5 percent said that it should, while 14 percent said it should not.

A sensible strategy would be to redeploy a modest number of US tactical nukes in South Korea. It would provide a trump card that would enable a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear problem. Most of all, it would become a game changer in the geopolitical and strategic dynamics surrounding the nuclear crisis. This would be similar to the “dual-track strategy” used by the administration of US President Ronald Reagan in Western Europe in the early 1980s. To make the Soviet Union withdraw intermediate-range missiles from Eastern Europe, the Reagan administration exercised a dual-track — if Moscow kept those missiles in place, Washington would deploy similar weapons in Western Europe; if Moscow withdrew their missiles, Washington would cancel the deployment plan. This strategy eventually led to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1987, removing all these missiles worldwide.

A carefully co-ordinated strategy of linking the ongoing Six-Party Talks with the potential redeployment of American tactical nukes would hopefully produce a similar outcome on the Korean Peninsula. The essence of the strategy is conditional and temporary. It is conditional in the sense that the decision to redeploy is tied to a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue. It is temporary in that tactical nukes would disappear again as soon as North Korea dismantled its nuclear weapons. A time limit would have to be imposed, because we cannot negotiate endlessly.
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Korea from being daunted by the North Korean nuclear threat.
• It would ease the South Korean military’s temptation to resort to a pre-emptive strike on North Korea to prevent the specter of North Korean nuclear warheads exploding on South Korean soil.
• It would serve as a kind of pressure valve to divert the South Korean public’s growing enthusiasm to develop our own nuclear weapons. South Korea’s non-nuclear policy is a cornerstone of the alliance with the US, and redeploying tactical nukes would be an astute compromise to allay public concerns without undermining the alliance.
• It would challenge North Korea’s belief in the value of its nuclear deterrent and thwart reckless provocations such as the attack on the Cheonan corvette or the shelling of Yeonpyong Island.
• Nuclear assets are the surest strategic balancer against an enemy’s nuclear arsenal as no conventional weapons can match nuclear weapons. Bringing back tactical nukes and corresponding nuclear-sharing arrangements between South Korea and the US would dramatically increase the alliance’s bargaining power, and shift nuclear negotiations in our favor.
• Tactical nukes on South Korean soil would also be a strategic burden for China, in addition to North Korea, and would affect its national interest calculations. By providing China and North Korea with a negative incentive, it would surely create a new negotiating dynamic advantageous for the alliance.
• Tactical nukes on South Korean soil would enhance the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella against North Korea and also reassure the South Korean public of the US security commitment. American bureaucrats often have said US-based and submarine-launched intercontinental missiles, as well as heavy bombers, form a credible enough deterrent to defend South Korea. These are empty words and expose two major strategic flaws. First, proximity is critical for a deterrent force, and that’s why the US maintains 28,000 troops on the Korean Peninsula today, in addition to planning for a massive buildup at the time of an emergency. Second, its formidable strategic nuclear assets are simply too big to be credible on the Korean Peninsula. No one would argue that it makes sense to use a grenade to kill a fly. North Korea is too small a country to be a target of intercontinental nuclear forces.
• As North Korea continues to develop long-range missiles, alliance dynamics in Northeast Asia will come to resemble those of Europe in the late 1950s. When the Soviet Union first fired its Sputnik missile and opened the intercontinental missile age, Western European allies began to worry that America might decouple its own security from alliance security in fear of a Soviet attack on the US mainland. Similar concerns on decoupling will become widespread in South Korea, and cause ripple effects in Japan. To allay looming concerns about such a possible decoupling, redeploying tactical nukes in South Korea is essential.

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