



Elections, Nukes, and the Future of the South Korea–U.S. Alliance

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INTRODUCTION

The impressive victory of President Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party in South Korea's April 2020 National Assembly elections obscured underlying security policy tensions within South Korea (or the Republic of Korea, ROK). These tensions reflect a deep and long-standing domestic split over how to deal with a nuclear North Korea and, to a lesser extent, concerns about the security alliance with the United States amid rising regional threats. In public opinion polls a consistent majority of South Koreans support acquiring nuclear weapons in some form, and centrist and conservative political parties have adopted official platforms calling on the United States to re-station nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. Looking beyond the November 2020 U.S. election, the stage is set for a potentially disruptive period in ROK-U.S. security relations. If today's tensions build, a worst-case clash of ideas and priorities between Seoul and Washington could rupture the ROK-U.S. alliance and lead South Korea to

pursue nuclear weapons. This is not highly likely, but it is imaginable.

LOOKING BEYOND THE CORONAVIRUS IN THE 2020 ELECTION RESULTS

South Korea's ruling Democratic Party won an outright majority in National Assembly elections held on April 15, 2020. After the dust settled, the Democrats held 176 out of 300 seats, an increase of some fifty seats over their prior general election showing. This result is the largest majority for a single party since the establishment of democratic rule in South Korea in 1987 and gives the ruling party broad latitude to pass legislation in support of Moon's agenda without needing votes from the opposition.

That the South Korean government was able to hold successful elections in the midst of the coronavirus



pandemic is itself a wonder, and many South Koreans rewarded Moon's party for the government's perceived success in mitigating the virus's spread. A preelection [Gallup Poll](#) gave Moon a 59 percent approval rating, and of those who viewed him positively, 54 percent indicated that the pandemic response was their top reason for supporting him.

Opposition party candidates often criticized Moon's foreign policy in the campaign and sought to make it a wedge issue. Moon's efforts to build new peaceful relations with North Korea drew particular ire from conservatives, who derisively termed it a "submissive policy." Although public support for Moon's North Korea policy swelled to 83 percent in a [May 2018](#) Gallup Poll, conducted just prior to the June North Korea-U.S. Summit in Singapore, by [August 2019](#) optimism had waned and 50 percent of polled South Koreans indicated disapproval of Moon's engagement policy (see figure 1).

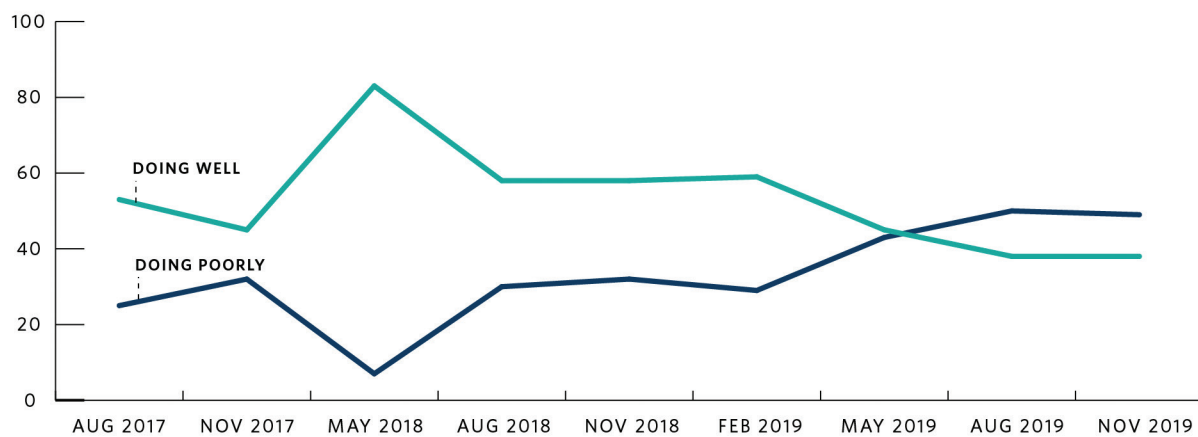
Despite split opinion on the government's efforts to engage North Korea, neither voters nor the media paid much attention to national security or foreign policy issues during the election. In the [preelection voter poll](#) by Gallup, only 2 percent of respondents mentioned

"diplomacy / international relations" as a reason for their positive rating of Moon. Among those critical of Moon, 29 percent cited his economic policies, but just 5 percent, 3 percent, and 1 percent, respectively, cited "diplomatic problems," "bias toward relations with North Korea / pro-North Korea tendencies," and "North Korean nuclear weapons / national security" as reasons for their negative rating of the president.

UNDERLYING SECURITY POLICY TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION

Clearly the importance of the coronavirus response trumped other issues during the 2020 general election. By the next South Korean presidential election in 2022, assuming the virus fades in political relevance, it seems likely that economic and livelihood issues will return as dominant factors. Foreign and security policy are likely to also have more relevance to the electorate, and especially relations with North Korea. Public opinion on security issues serves as a logical barometer for anticipating how such issues might influence the election and subsequent shifts in South Korean policy. Three issues bear observation: threat perceptions regarding

FIGURE 1
Is the Moon Government Doing Well on North Korean Policy?



SOURCE: Gallup

North Korea, concerns about the health of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and support for nuclear weapons.

Threat Perceptions Regarding North Korea

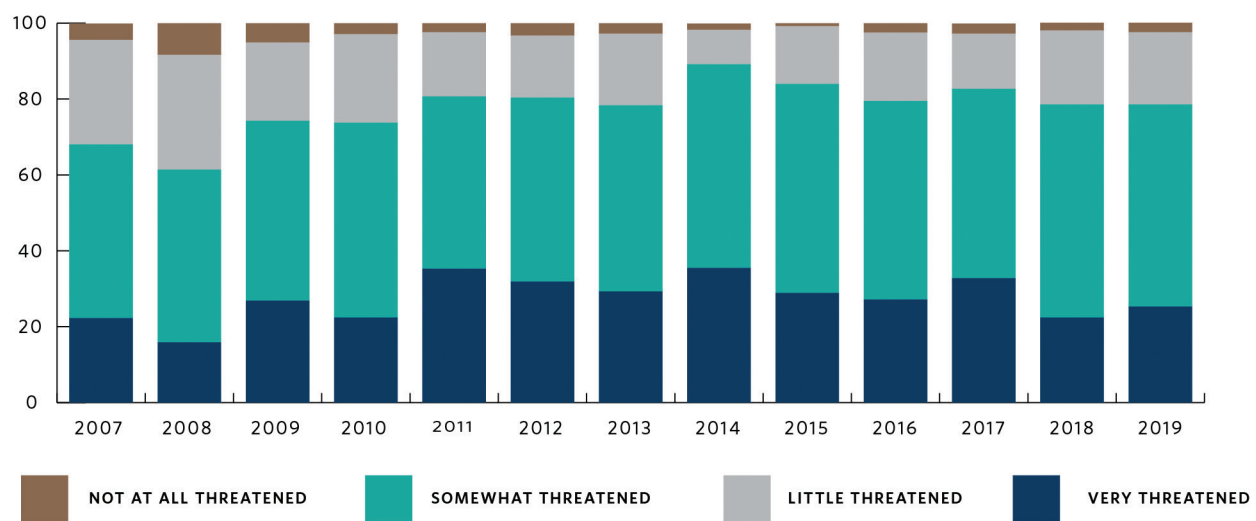
For over a decade South Koreans have been living next to a North Korea that possesses nuclear weapons. Periodic military crises and North Korean saber rattling, especially in 2010, elevated public concerns over the threat from the north. Longitudinal polling by the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (SNU IPUS) since 2007 shows that the percentage of South Koreans who feel “very” or “somewhat” threatened by North Korea has hovered consistently around 80 percent for the last decade (see figure 2).

But it also seems that South Koreans are becoming somewhat inured to the danger from North Korea as other national security challenges arise. Although *absolute* threat perception of North Korea remains high, shifts in South Koreans’ *relative* threat perception suggest a more nuanced picture. When asked to rank the **country most threatening** to peace on the Korean

Peninsula, South Koreans identified North Korea as the top choice from 2008 to 2017, a period in which North Korea conducted five nuclear explosive tests, launched missiles of increasing range, and provoked several political and military crises with South Korea. After 2016, however, perceived dangers from North Korea began to decline, and since 2018, polled individuals have identified China as the main threat, North Korea second, and Japan a close third (see figure 3).

Clearly the decrease in relative threat perception regarding North Korea ties to improved inter-Korean relations and the resumption of North Korea–U.S. diplomacy after the 2018 Winter Olympics. But the increase in perceived dangers from China and Japan shows that South Koreans are anxious about the security environment in East Asia. These fears were amplified by China’s economic retaliation for Seoul’s 2016 decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile system to defend against North Korean missiles, and by a sharp rise in South Korea’s diplomatic and military tensions with Japan over contested history and territory in 2018–2019.

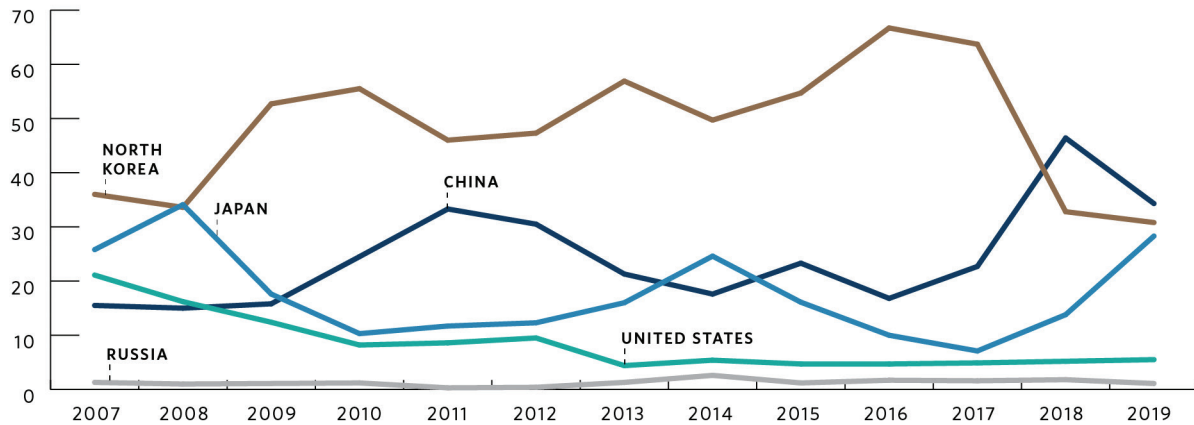
FIGURE 2
“Do You Feel Threatened by the North’s Possession of Nuclear Weapons?”



SOURCE: SNU IPUS



FIGURE 3
“Which Country Is the Most Threatening to the Peace of the Korean Peninsula?”



SOURCE: SNU IPUS

The ROK-U.S. Alliance

At a time when South Koreans perceive growing threats in the region, public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance remains understandably high. In two polls by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in [December 2019](#) and [June 2020](#), over 90 percent of South Korean respondents backed the alliance. This figure is similar to the 96 percent support indicated by a 2014 poll conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, suggesting relatively consistent views over time.¹ Respondents in the Chicago Council polls also overwhelmingly supported maintaining U.S. troops in South Korea (74 percent) and sustaining the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence “umbrella” (71 percent). Polled South Koreans expressed confidence that the United States would defend South Korea if attacked by North Korea (78 percent), and affirmed that the alliance is to the mutual benefit of both countries (63 percent).

Notably, these polls affirm South Korean public support for the alliance despite an acrimonious disagreement about how to share the costs of maintaining U.S. troops in South Korea. At the outset of what had previously been routine negotiations in early 2019, Washington reportedly asked Seoul for \$5 billion, a fivefold increase

over the 2018 agreed payment of \$920 million. This demand was viewed as extortionate in Seoul, and negotiations dragged on into 2020, perhaps with the South Korean government hoping to delay settlement until after the November U.S. election. The [December 2019](#) Chicago Council poll reflected some South Korean discontent over the negotiations, with 68 percent of respondents agreeing that “South Korea should negotiate a lower cost,” while 70 percent of respondents said that failure to reach an agreement would be negative for South Korea’s national security. Yet such views did not dim overall support for the alliance.

Although South Koreans apparently do not perceive the burden-sharing disagreement as indicative of weakening U.S. credibility to defend South Korea (yet), a potential U.S. troop withdrawal reportedly under consideration by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump could affect their confidence in the U.S. commitment. The [June 2020](#) Chicago Council poll assessed that such a move could damage the alliance because it “has the potential to shift South Korean attitudes away from seeing the alliance as mutually beneficial and towards views that the alliance benefits only the United States.” This finding reinforces other sources of tension seen in South Korean public opinion that suggest a cleavage of

purpose in the alliance, with South Koreans increasingly of the view that Seoul and Washington have divergent security objectives. In the December 2019 Chicago Council poll, some 55 percent of respondents indicated that South Korea and the United States were not aligned on regional security issues, while 52 percent also believed the two states were working in different directions on denuclearizing North Korea. Even if money issues are resolved, these basic questions about shared objectives will remain.

Considering that South Koreans remain quite concerned about the threat from North Korea, and increasingly concerned about regional security, it is striking that a majority of South Koreans believe simultaneously that the alliance remains mutually beneficial but that Washington is not working with Seoul's interests in mind. It is plausible that if South Koreans perceive a dichotomous choice between alliance or going it alone, then the alliance is preferable, at least so long as South Korea does not possess sufficiently robust defense capabilities for the panoply of regional threats. However, Trump's threats to withdraw troops in the context of burden-sharing negotiations underscore doubts in the minds of many South Koreans about the credibility of U.S.

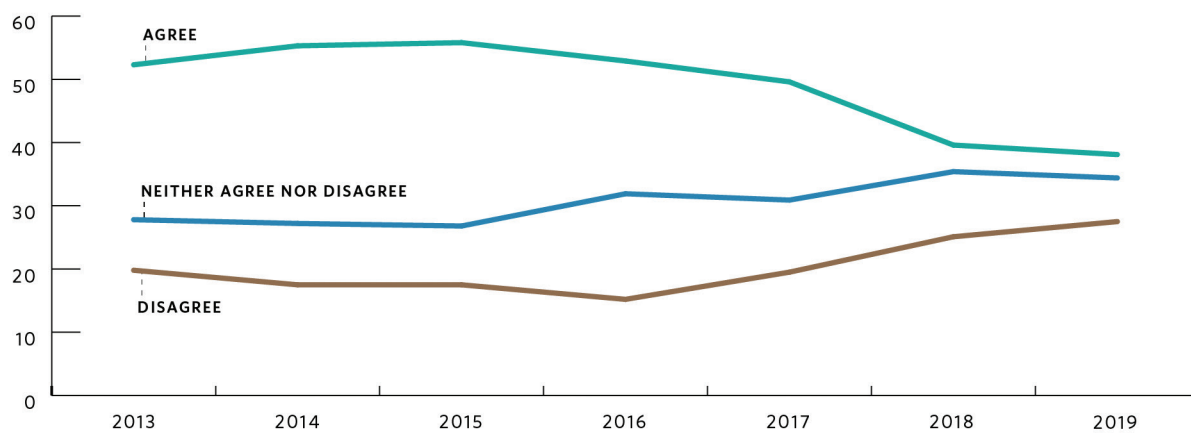
commitments, even if this impact is not fully reflected in the survey results.

Support for Nuclear Weapons

Amid rising threats in the region over the last two decades, periodic public opinion polling demonstrates consistent majority support in South Korea to have the protection of nuclear weapons—either American nuclear missiles deployed on the Korean Peninsula or an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal. The level of support has varied over the years and according to the question, timing, and polling methodology, but most polls place support between 50 and 70 percent. Longitudinal polling by SNU IPUS showed that between 2013 and 2016 a majority of respondents agreed that South Korea should possess nuclear weapons. Though that support dipped under 50 percent after 2016, the percentage of people opposed to possession of nuclear weapons has remained low, peaking at just over 27 percent in 2019 (see figure 4).

There are reasons to suspect that public support for nuclear weapons represents more populist sentiment than considered policy. Favorability for nuclear weapons would likely drop if potential adverse economic and

FIGURE 4
"Do You Agree That South Korea Should Also Possess Nuclear Weapons?"



SOURCE: SNU IPUS



security consequences of acquiring them became clear. Indeed, perhaps the only poll to pose questions about likely consequences suggested that there might be as much as a 15–30 percent drop in support.² It also appears that politicians who have sought to harness [national security populism](#) by stressing the threat from North Korea and publicly advocating for nuclear weapons have not enjoyed much electoral success to date. Together, the probability that support for nuclear weapons is softer than represented by polling and the lack of electoral success for national security populists suggest that analysts should not read too much into the polling (see table 1).

Notably, South Korean polling on nuclear weapons does not differentiate between two options with vastly different implications for South Korean security: U.S. re-stationing of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, or South Korean development and possession of its own nuclear arsenal. In the first option, South Korea would preserve its nonproliferation commitments and invest further trust in the United States to manage nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. In the second, South Korea would violate its nonproliferation pledges, with uncertain implications for the status of its alliance with the United States. One of the few surveys to poll attitudes on both options—a [2016 poll](#) carried out by Yonhap News and KBS—showed that 29.3 percent supported South Korea developing its own arsenal, while 23.2 percent supported redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. This slight preference for an independent arsenal, despite the uncertain implications for the U.S. alliance and vitiation of South Korea’s nonproliferation commitments, is noteworthy.

It is reasonable to assume that South Korean public support for acquisition of nuclear weapons is driven by the perceived threat from North Korea or by concerns about the reliability of U.S. alliance commitments. Although the data gives an impression of correlation between North Korean threat and nuclear weapons interest, without additional and more consistent polling results the existence of a correlation is not clear. It is also the case that many of the polls on nuclear weapons were

TABLE 1
Aggregate Opinion Polls on South Korean Nuclear Weapons³

Year	Institution	Support	Oppose
2010	Asan Institute for Policy Studies	55.6%	44.5%
2011	Asan Institute for Policy Studies	62.6%	37.4%
2012	Asan Institute for Policy Studies	66.0%	34.0%
2013	Gallup	64.0%	28.0%
2013	SNU IPUS	52.3%	19.8%
2013	Asan Institute for Policy Studies	62.9%	37.1%
2014	SNU IPUS	55.3%	17.5%
2014	Asan Institute for Policy Studies (July)	60.0%	40.0%
2014	Asan Institute for Policy Studies (October)	61.3%	38.7%
2015	SNU IPUS	55.8%	17.5%
2016	Gallup (January)	54.0%	38.0%
2016	JoongAng Ilbo	67.7%	30.5%
2016	SNU IPUS	52.9%	15.2%
2016	Gallup (September)	58.0%	34.0%
2017	SNU IPUS	49.6%	19.5%
2017	Realmeter	53.5%	35.1%
2017	Gallup	60.0%	35.0%
2018	SNU IPUS	39.6%	25.1%
2019	Korea Institute for National Unification	60.3%	39.7%
2019	SNU IPUS	38.1%	27.5%

conducted in the days after North Korean nuclear and missile tests, so there could be some temporal influence on the survey results. There is not sufficient data on alliance concerns and nuclear weapons to confirm a relationship between those issues.

One recent public opinion poll that posed a very different question sheds interesting light on this matter. A [2019 poll](#) conducted by Research & Polling Inc. for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asked survey participants whether a *unified* Korea should have nuclear weapons. Surprisingly, 60 percent of survey participants supported having nuclear weapons. This suggests that regardless of the source or strength of the perceived threats from North Korea, or the status of the U.S. alliance, many South Koreans simply perceive the need to possess nuclear weapons. The extent to which this is driven by broader regional fears, potential decoupling of the alliance with the United States, or other desires and concerns is unclear.

ELITE POLITICS AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Analysts have often noted the consistent majority in South Korean public opinion polls favorable to possession of nuclear weapons, [interpreting](#) it mainly as an expression of concern over perceived erosion of the effectiveness of U.S. extended deterrence commitments amid North Korea's nuclear arming. Less observed—but in many ways a more concerning portent of a future South Korean decision to seek nuclear arms—is the mainstreaming of support for nuclear weapons among centrist and conservative political parties. In the 2017 and 2020 elections, the evolution of party platforms, especially those of the chief conservative party,⁴ shows a hardening of positions on nuclear weapons more indicative of potential future policy direction.

As early as 2006, when North Korea claimed to have carried out its first nuclear test, conservative South Korean politicians began floating ideas about the return of

U.S. nuclear weapons, which had been removed from South Korea in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Cold War wound down. Some politicians went further, arguing that South Korea could be forced to “[think the unthinkable](#)” and develop a nuclear arsenal independent of the United States. During an October 2017 visit to Washington, Hong Jun-pyo, then the chair of the Korean conservative party, argued in a [think tank forum](#) that if the United States did not return tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea, Seoul would have no choice but to develop its own nuclear weapons. As with populist public opinion, such political support for nuclear weapons would probably decrease once the potential costs and consequences entered the debate.

Although many prominent politicians made statements in support of nuclear weapons after 2006, it was only in 2017 that the main South Korean conservative party officially adopted a position on nuclear weapons in its election platform. In that year's presidential contest, the [Liberty Korea Party](#) committed to seeking “redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula through consultations with the United States.”

In its 2020 general election platform, the rebranded conservative [United Future Party](#) went even further, calling not only for relocating U.S. tactical nuclear weapons but also for “nuclear sharing” through a new “nuclear alliance” agreement with the United States. Through such an alliance upgrade, the party proposed that South Korea would have the right to jointly operate with U.S. nuclear forces under shared wartime control. Although these positions stopped short of stipulating that South Korea would build its own nuclear weapons if the United States refused its demands, the increasing specificity of its position complicates any future potential negotiations between Seoul and Washington along these lines.

It is not only the conservative party that has made nuclear weapons an election issue. In the 2017 presidential election, the centrist [People's Party's](#) platform also called for the rotational deployment of U.S. “strategic assets.” Like the conservatives, the [People's Party](#) evolved its position on



nuclear weapons for the 2020 general election, when its platform proposed to build a “NATO-style nuclear sharing system” between South Korea and the United States. That said, the poor electoral showing by the People’s Party in the 2020 election (in which it garnered just three seats in the National Assembly) raises questions about whether the “center” in South Korean politics really matters.

Notably, the ruling Democratic Party eschewed discussions of tactical nuclear weapons or an independent nuclear arsenal in its platforms. Democratic Party legislators have also been vocal in criticizing public discussion of nuclear options. For example, in public comments in 2019, Representative Choi Jae-sung argued for [avoiding discussion](#) of nuclear armament on the grounds that it is “quite emotional and populist.” Left-leaning [media editorials](#) have also criticized the idea of requesting the United States to return tactical nuclear weapons, calling it “irresponsible security populism.” But it is unclear how much this opposition is driven by fears that open debate on nuclear weapons could jeopardize the inter-Korean peace process as opposed to a broader commitment to nonproliferation norms.

Although the conservative parties and the People’s Party are well short of a majority in the National Assembly, together these two blocs accounted for 45 percent of the vote in the 2017 presidential election. The consolidation of their positions around the return of U.S. nuclear weapons is noteworthy. Considering the majority public support for nuclear weapons described herein, it seems that conservative and centrist party positions on nuclear weapons represent mainstream public views. As with public opinion, however, it seems likely that politicians might temper support for nuclear weapons once potential consequences of such a move became clear.

Despite the emotional, populist nature of party positions on nuclear weapons, it does not appear that a candidate’s or party’s support for [nuclear weapons garners votes](#)—at least not in elections since 2016. So why might political parties stake out this position? Given that proponents of an independent nuclear arsenal face no discernable domestic or international censure for advo-

cating positions in contravention of South Korea’s non-proliferation commitments, it does not appear that these statements are trial balloons used to assess potential responses. More likely, politicians are trying to normalize and remove the stigma of discussing nuclear weapons in public discourse, such that a future government decision to develop nuclear weapons would be seen as a mainstream security option. Some politicians might also be attempting to engage in [coercive signaling](#) to the United States, with the aim of improving South Korea’s bargaining position for additional security support during the next conservative South Korean presidency. They might also be attempting to signal China that China needs to reign in North Korea lest South Korea be provoked to acquire nuclear weapons, an outcome China wishes to avoid. Or it could be a signal to North Korea not to take attempts to push South Korea too far. Some politicians demanding return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons may calculate (probably correctly) that Washington could not deliver, which then gives them a pretense to pursue an independent nuclear arsenal. It is also probable that some South Korean politicians simply believe, whatever the reason, that Seoul needs nuclear weapons.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE 2020 U.S. ELECTION

A new American administration will assume office in January 2021, and South Koreans will elect a new president in mid-2022. The configurations of power decided by these elections will have important ramifications for the future of the alliance. Without assessing which candidates and parties might prevail in these contests, it is worth speculating on how policy choices faced by the next U.S. administration might set the tone for the alliance.

A Second Trump Term

A second Trump administration seems likely to double down on its burden-sharing payment demands of South

Korea. Although a *modus vivendi* is likely, reaching it without further bruising South Korean feelings or avoiding the debacle of a U.S. troop reduction is far from certain. Of greater consequence is whether Trump would pursue new nuclear diplomacy with North Korea and whether he would seek to draw South Korea more directly into the fray of Chinese-U.S. competition, issues over which there is greater potential divergence between South Korean and U.S. interests. The Moon administration cheered Trump's prior personal diplomacy gambits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, but was frustrated by Washington's inability to translate summit spectacles into sustained movement toward nuclear restraint and is probably wary of Trump's promises for a quick deal should he be reelected. Meanwhile, Seoul has tread carefully with Beijing out of desire for Chinese help on North Korea and concern not to suffer another round of Chinese economic retaliation.

As it seeks to balance risks and opportunities, it seems plausible that the Moon administration might seek distance from Washington at the outset of a second Trump term. In such circumstances, heading into South Korea's 2022 election, South Korean conservative politicians face an interesting choice: double down on their long-standing commitment to a strong U.S. alliance, despite their disfavor of Trump's North Korea diplomacy, or argue for taking greater responsibility for South Korea's security through acquisition of nuclear weapons.

A Biden Administration

If Joe Biden becomes the next U.S. president, restoring credibility with U.S. allies is likely to be major plank of the administration's foreign policy, including a quick resolution of differences over burden sharing. A trickier issue involves [Biden's stated interest](#) in changing U.S. nuclear policy to declare that the "sole purpose" of nuclear weapons is to deter other nuclear weapons. In practice, such a declaration is unlikely to make conflict with U.S. adversaries any more or less likely. But some

allies fear it would mean a weakening of the perceived efficacy of the U.S. commitment to extend nuclear deterrence over the territories of those states. Some analysts in Seoul assess that without the threat of a U.S. *nuclear* response to a North Korean *conventional military* campaign, deterrence of North Korea could be weakened.

If a Biden administration were to seek to change U.S. nuclear policy in this way, it seems likely that demands from South Korean conservatives for the United States to re-station nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula—as it does through NATO in Europe—could intensify. Looking to the 2022 South Korean presidential contest, Washington will face a delicate challenge in managing this issue.

COULD SOUTH KOREA SEEK NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Looking beyond the 2020 U.S. election and the 2022 South Korean presidential contest, Seoul and Washington could certainly muddle through the security tensions building in the alliance. After more than seventy years of ups and downs, including periods of deeper tension than exists today, the alliance has proven resilient. Growing South Korean fears about regional security and the political scrambling resulting from the Trump administration's foreign policy toward the peninsula could, however, produce outcomes unimaginable just a few years ago. Reflecting on the unease in Seoul with Trump's approach to the ROK-U.S. alliance and the persistent nuclear threat from North Korea, one [South Korean analyst](#) concludes, "If these trends continue, a nuclear South Korea is a question of 'when,' not 'if.'"

Western proliferation analysts have long worried that South Korea might pursue nuclear weapons, even though Seoul has built very solid nonproliferation credentials since abandoning a secret nuclear weapons program in the 1970s. So what circumstances might



hasten the “when” in the proposition suggested by this South Korean analyst? Nuclear prophecies can be prone to alarmism, but the following scenario is readily imaginable given public and elite support for a nuclear option in South Korea: In response to a North Korean provocation, U.S. withdrawal of troops from the Korean Peninsula, or perhaps following the 2022 presidential contest, Seoul makes a formal, public request of Washington to return tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula. Washington declines given nonproliferation, cost, and regional security and stability considerations. Would Seoul at that point settle for other means of strengthening the alliance and its own deterrence capabilities, despite the loss of face at having been refused by Washington? Or would it begin work on its own bomb program? Or might it pursue both options at once? And how would Washington react to signals (covert or overt) of a South Korean nuclear weapons development effort?

If this scenario and its implications seems far-fetched, it is worth recalling two past episodes in ROK-U.S. relations.

In late 2016, South Korean deputy national security adviser Cho Tae-yong reportedly visited Washington to make a *secret* request that the United States redeploy tactical nuclear weapons. According to South Korean [media reports](#) that surfaced a year after the purported request, the White House official who met with Cho declined on the grounds that stationing nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula did not comport with then U.S. president Barack Obama’s policy of working toward a world without nuclear weapons. It is not clear whether South Korea’s former president Park Gyun-hae reiterated this request of the incoming Trump administration or if, by then, it was immobilized by the mass protests in South Korea that eventually led to Park’s removal from office months later. If a South Korean conservative administration has made this request to the United States once already, albeit privately, it does not seem a stretch to imagine such a request by a future conservative president.

In 1974, in the wake of several North Korean acts of aggression and concerns about U.S. retrenchment from Asia after the Vietnam War, South Korea’s then president Park Chung-hee initiated a secret nuclear weapons development program. Later studies by [South Korean historians](#) affirmed that Park was, in particular, motivated to pursue a nuclear bomb capability due to fear of U.S. abandonment, exemplified by Washington’s withdrawal of its Seventh Infantry Division from South Korea in 1971. And it was exactly those fears that the administration of then president Jimmy Carter tapped into when it [threatened to withdraw](#) U.S. troops and tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea if Park did not cease the bomb program. Under immense U.S. pressure, Park eventually backed away from the secret weapons program.

Although the secret South Korean nuclear weapons program is now long past, key nuclear weapons–related technologies remained and advanced openly and with U.S. support, including Seoul’s ballistic missile program and nuclear research and energy enterprise. Further, revelations about secret fissile material experiments in the early 1980s (after Seoul had ended the nuclear weapons effort) and again in the early 2000s raise questions about how much of the infrastructure and knowledge for a weapons program remains from the Park program. Some [South Korean technical experts](#) estimate that it would take just eighteen months for Seoul to achieve a nuclear weapon. Should Seoul again face a crisis of confidence about U.S. security commitments, it is plausible to imagine a reprise of Park’s 1974 decision to authorize nuclear weapons development.

Both episodes should serve as a cautionary tale about potential divergence in American and South Korean threat perceptions and the role that South Korean nuclear weapons might play in such circumstances. South Korean public opinion and elite political support for nuclear weapons may be dismissed as just populist sentiment, but the underlying security concerns are important. Yet the policy options available to both Seoul and

Washington are not a binary choice between an ROK--U.S. alliance or a nuclear South Korea. There is much that could be done to build and **posture the alliance** for the evolving threat environment in East Asia in ways that could mitigate the drivers of nuclear weapons interest in South Korea. It serves neither country's interests to permit a crisis in alliance relations to build to the point that Seoul believes its interests are better served by its own nuclear weapons than by maintaining a strong ROK-U.S. alliance.

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NOTES

- 1 Cited in <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/while-positive-toward-us-alliance-south-koreans-want-counter-trumps-demands-host-nation>.
- 2 Jiyoung Kim, "Public Opinion on the Nuclear Korea: The South Korean Perspective," PowerPoint presentation, 2015.
- 3 Poll results drawn from multiple sources, as well Jiyoung Kim, "Public Opinion on the Nuclear Korea: The South Korean Perspective," PowerPoint presentation, 2015.
- 4 South Korean political parties change names frequently. In the last five years, the main conservative party in South Korea has had four different names: Saenuri Party, Liberty Korea Party, United Future Party, and now People Power Party. Despite the different names, the party comprises most of the same politician and principles, so for the sake of simplicity we simply term this group the conservative party. Notably, we exclude here extreme right-wing groups, such as the Korean Patriots' Party and its newer guise, Our Republican Party.

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