

To Nuclearize, or Not to Nuclearize

Tracing the South Korean Nuclear Debate from 2016 to the

Third Inter-Korean Summit

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While 2018 was filled with significant diplomatic developments on the Korean Peninsula, the geopolitical landscape two years ago was vastly different. The period from 2016-2017 marked a distinct crisis in the region, with unprecedented progress in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. While these events have consumed the lion's share of international coverage, they have also triggered frantic, though seldom discussed, debate within South Korea on whether it should acquire its own nuclear deterrent. This paper examines the South Korean nuclear debate in two phases: the 'crisis period' between 2016-2017 and the immediate 'post-crisis period' from the start of 2018 to the third Inter-Korean summit in April, 2018. Using an original analysis of 750 articles from the leading English- and Korean-language newspapers in South Korea, this paper identifies the key factors shaping the nuclear debate, which policies were pursued, and what security narratives tackled the nuclear question. The findings suggest that the South Korean nuclear discourse is heavily dependent on the existence of a North Korean nuclear threat and concerns over U.S. involvement in South Korean security. In debating both the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and the development of a domestic nuclear deterrent force, South Korean lawmakers and government officials overwhelmingly address the nuclear question in terms of security or economic concerns rather than normative ones. These findings are expected to directly impact the effectiveness and stability of the ongoing peace efforts on the peninsula.

Introduction

Speaking in her New Year's address in 2016, former South Korean President Park Geun-hye addressed calls for her country to reintroduce U.S. nuclear weapons to deter the North Korean threat by stating: "I have always emphasized in the international community that the nuclear-free world must begin from the Korean Peninsula."¹ This principled statement of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula—grounded in the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula between North and South Korea in January 1992—persisted through Park's eventual impeachment and into the new administration of the liberal Moon Jae-in. Speaking on his North Korea policy in an interview with CNN in September 2017, Moon stated, "If we respond to the situation with an attitude that we will

¹ Yoon Min-sik, "Park urges more aggressive role from China on North Korea's nuclear problem," *The Korea Herald*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160113000648>.

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counter a nuclear-armed North with a nuclear-armed South, peace cannot be maintained between the two Koreas.”²

While firm opposition to South Korean nuclearization occurs consistently at the highest levels of the executive government, lawmakers—and even the general population—were not so convinced. In the face of North Korea’s unprecedented advancements in missile technology, questions about South Korea’s own nuclear capability swept through the public consciousness. Some proponents called for the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, while others went further, demanding the establishment of a domestic nuclear deterrent. Both options enjoyed a high degree of public support. Yet as quickly as these debates emerged, North Korea’s diplomatic volte-face—its cooperation in the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics, the resumption of dialogue, and the third Inter-Korean summit in April 2018—drastically altered the geopolitical climate. As relations improved, these debates died down in the public discourse.

This paper will examine how South Korea grappled with the question of nuclearization from the beginning of 2016 to the third Inter-Korean summit in April 2018, a time frame corresponding to a clear ‘crisis period’ and immediate ‘post-crisis period’ for inter-Korean relations. After briefly tracing the history of nuclear weapons in South Korea and scholarly literature on the debate, this paper utilizes an original analysis of 750 articles from the leading English- and Korean-language newspapers in South Korea to identify key factors shaping the nuclear debate, which policies were pursued, and what security narratives (‘frames’) were used. The findings suggest that the South Korean nuclear discourse is strongly tied to fears over the North Korean nuclear threat, and relatedly, U.S. involvement in the South Korean (or, more broadly, East Asian) security architecture. The findings also suggest that, despite the rhetoric framing the anti-nuclear debate, the nuclear question is overwhelmingly addressed in terms of security or economic (i.e. material) concerns rather than normative ones. These discoveries carry direct implications on the effectiveness and stability of the ongoing peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula.

1. History of Nuclear Weapons in South Korea

The deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, from 1958 and expanding through the early 1960s, was built on the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea after the Korean War. These initially consisted of surface-to-surface missile systems, nuclear landmines, cruise missiles, bombs for fighter-bombers, and nuclear artillery weapons systems. By 1967, the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons arsenal in South Korea reached a total of 950 nuclear warheads. However, new tactics for advanced conventional weapons and

2 Ser Myo-ja, “Moon rules out nuclear weapons in South Korea,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 15, 2017, <http://koreajoon-gangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038452>.

concerns over the use of weapons stockpiles in allied countries led to an overall reduction in U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea from around 640 in 1974 to 150 in 1982.³

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Cold War détente drove President George H. W. Bush to announce the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) in September, 1991 to reduce U.S. overseas deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.⁴ Subsequently, the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) arranged the withdrawal of the approximately 100 remaining U.S. nuclear warheads from the peninsula. In November 1991, South Korea and the United States agreed to completely withdraw all warheads by the end of the year. In December 1991, President Roh Tae-woo announced that the withdrawal of all U.S. nuclear weapons had been completed.⁵

While tactical nuclear weapons were largely a matter of U.S. decision making, South Korea attempted its own domestic nuclear weapons program in the 1970s. Despite originating as a peaceful nuclear program, changes in the state's security environment in the 1960s (largely due to the Nixon Doctrine) prompted its militarization under President Park Chung-hee.⁶ From 1971-1975, the Korean Atomic Energy Research Institute (KAERI) negotiated with nuclear-supplying countries such as France, Belgium, and Canada to gain the requisite nuclear fuel fabrication and reprocessing technology.⁷ Weapons design and delivery technology fell largely on the Agency for Defence Development (ADD), which in 1972 devised a missile development plan with the Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), and the Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The ADD also acquired basic ballistic missile design technology from McDonnell Douglas, secured a propellant factory from Lockheed, and gained manufacturing technologies from the French company: SNPE.⁸

In 1974, following a successful nuclear test in India that raised concerns over the stability of the non-proliferation regime, the U.S. began applying pressure on South Korea's nuclear and missile program. Multiple negotiations to end the program took place between the U.S. embassy in Seoul and the Park administration with little success. Ultimately, South Korea gave in and ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in April 1975. The final nail in the coffin came when Park backed out of a nuclear technology deal

3 Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "A history of US nuclear weapons in South Korea," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 6 (2017), 350-351.

4 Susan J. Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012), 2-13.

5 Kristensen and Norris, "A history of US nuclear weapons in South Korea," 351-352.

6 Sung Gul Hong, "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, eds. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 486-487.

7 *Ibid.*, 489-492.

8 *Ibid.*, 494-495.

with France between December 1975 and January 1976.⁹ Similar rhetoric continued into the 2000s with few developments in South Korea's nuclear capability.

1.1 The Nuclearization Debate in South Korea

Three main arguments have dominated the academic discourse on South Korean nuclearization since the beginning of the 2010s. The first is the need to defend against a nuclear North Korea. Proponents of this view suggest nuclear weapons are necessary to protect South Korea against an attack from a nuclear-armed North Korea and to deter the regime from provocations or nuclear blackmail.¹⁰ By extension, South Korean nuclear armament could serve as leverage to negotiate the mutual denuclearization of both Koreas, and to pressure China to compel North Korea to denuclearize.¹¹

The second argument concerns the efficacy of U.S.-extended deterrence guarantees. As described above, fears of wavering U.S. commitment to South Korean defense prompted South Korea's domestic nuclearization attempt in the 1970s.¹² More recently, given North Korea's rapid progress in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, skeptics have questioned the reliability of extended deterrence if it risks placing major cities on the U.S. mainland under the North's nuclear threat.¹³ The possible decline in American economic and military supremacy and the lack of an overarching collective security institution in the region make nuclearization a wise precautionary strategy for South Korea to reduce its dependence on the United States.¹⁴

The third and final argument revolves around a perceived lack of sovereignty within South Korea over its own security. Here, successful nuclearization is equated with state power: vis-à-vis North Korea and in light of continued U.S. wartime operational control; as a continuation of South Korean political and economic development following protracted foreign occupation and influence; and as a point of pride for its scientific community.¹⁵

1.2 Defining the Crisis and Post-Crisis Periods

While nuclear weapons have been discussed over a protracted period of South Korean history, the geopolitical events in inter-Korean relations throughout 2016-2017

9 Ibid., 496-501.

10 Toby Dalton and Alexandra Francis, "South Korea's Search for Nuclear Sovereignty," *Asia Policy* 19 (2015): 119-120; Rajaram Panda, "Should South Korea go Nuclear?" *Asia-Pacific Review* 22, no. 1 (2015): 159.

11 Mun Suk Ahn and Young Chul Cho, "A nuclear South Korea?," *International Journal* 69, no. 1 (2014): 28.

12 Dalton and Francis, "South Korea's Search for Nuclear Sovereignty," 118; Se Young Jang, "The Evolution of US Extended Deterrence and South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016): 507-513.

13 Panda, "Should South Korea go Nuclear?," 159.

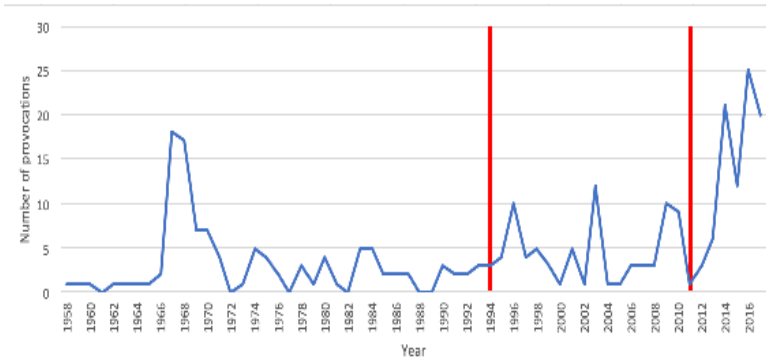
14 Ahn and Cho, "A nuclear South Korea?," 29.

15 Ibid., 28, 31; Dalton and Francis, "South Korea's Search for Nuclear Sovereignty," 119.

and rapid détente in the beginning of 2018 demarcate a distinct ‘crisis period’ and ‘immediate post-crisis period’ in terms of factors impacting South Korean prospects for nuclearization.

The two-year crisis period stands out in terms of the frequency and nature of North Korea’s missile and nuclear testing.¹⁶ Quantitatively, there was a notable increase in the number of provocations since Kim Jong-un’s leadership takeover in 2011-2012. Figure 1 shows the total number of provocations by year from 1958 to 2017. The two vertical lines mark the North Korean regime changes in 1994 and 2011.

Figure 1 – All DPRK provocations (1958-2017)



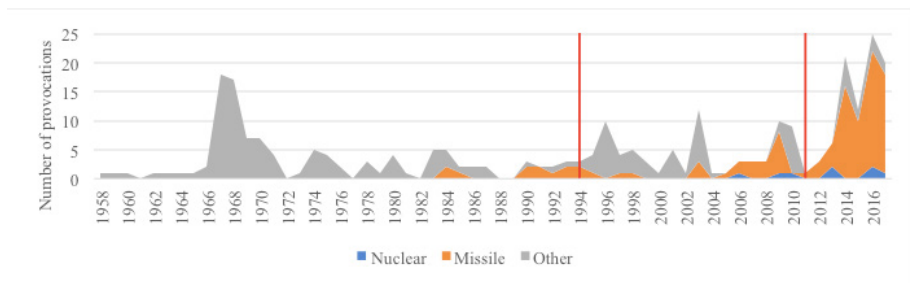
Under the Kim Jong-il regime, North Korea engaged in a total of 77 provocations. By comparison, North Korea engaged in 87 provocations under the Kim Jong-un regime: ten more than under the preceding regime and in roughly one third the duration. 2016-2017 also reached unprecedented numbers of provocations, peaking at 25 in 2016 with a slight decrease to 20 provocations in 2017. This marks the greatest period of heightened tensions since 1967-1968.

The nature of these provocations is also significant. Figure 2 breaks down these provocations by type.¹⁷ Again, the transition years between leaders are marked by a vertical line.

¹⁶ This section draws from data on North Korean provocations from the Beyond Parallel study conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The dataset includes four categories of provocations: nuclear provocations; missile provocations; and two groups of other provocations (terrorist activities, military or naval skirmishes, territorial incursions, etc.). While the Beyond Parallel study does not provide an explicit definition of a provocation, the coded events correspond to belligerent military actions above the level of verbal rhetoric that resulted in a worsening of DPRK-ROK or DPRK-US relations.

¹⁷ The Beyond Parallel database breaks the provocations into four categories: 1) nuclear provocations; 2) missile provocations; 3) other provocations; and 4) other (terrorist activities, military or naval skirmishes, territorial incursions, etc.). The latter two categories have been combined in this paper for ease of understanding.

Figure 2 – All DPRK provocations (1958-2017), by type



While ‘other’ provocations make up the bulk of provocations under Kim Il-sung and the first half of the Kim Jong-il regime, most provocations under Kim Jong-un are missile-type provocations, alongside several nuclear tests. In 2016-2017, these missile and nuclear tests reached significant technological milestones. North Korea’s launch on July 4, 2017 of the Hwasong-14 was confirmed by the U.S. to be North Korea’s first ever inter-continental ballistic missile test, at an estimated maximum range of 6,700 kilometres.¹⁸ This was surpassed by the Hwasong-15 on November 28, 2017 with an estimated range of 13,000 kilometres, raising fears of reaching the U.S. mainland.¹⁹ On the nuclear front, these two years saw North Korea conduct three separate nuclear tests: January 6, 2016, September 9, 2016, and September 3, 2017. Estimates by the Norwegian Seismic Array (NORSAR) rated the explosive yield of the January 2016 test at 10 kiloton (kT) equivalent of TNT, doubling to 20kT for the September 2016 test, and up to 300kT for the most recent September 2017 test.^{20,21,22}

By late 2017, however, this crisis gave way to a distinct ‘immediate post-crisis period’ wherein provocations effectively came to a standstill, followed by a shift towards positive diplomatic developments on the Korean Peninsula in the new year. In his New

18 Choi Sang-Hun, “U.S. Confirms North Korea Fired Intercontinental Ballistic Missile,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/04/world/asia/north-korea-missile-test-icbm.html>.

19 “North Korea launches ‘highest ever’ ballistic missile,” *BBC News*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42160227>.

20 “Update on the location of North Korea’s latest nuclear test,” NORSAR, January 6, 2016, <https://www.norsar.no/getfile.php/133705-1476947899/norsar.no/Press/PressReleases/20160106-Press%20release%20NORSAR%20on%20North%20Korea%206th%20Jan%202016.pdf>.

21 “North Korean underground nuclear test larger than previous tests,” NORSAR, September 9, 2016, <https://www.norsar.no/getfile.php/134507-1480584418/norsar.no/Press/PressReleases/20160909-North-Korea-PressRelease.pdf>.

22 “The nuclear explosion in North Korea on 3 September 2017: A revised magnitude assessment,” NORSAR, September 12, 2017, <https://www.norsar.no/press/latest-press-release/archive/the-nuclear-explosion-in-north-korea-on-3-september-2017-a-revised-magnitude-assessment-article1548-984.html>.

Year Address for 2018, Kim Jong-un expressed his openness to participate in the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympic Games, as well as his intent to pursue Détente on the Korean Peninsula.²³ Just over a week later, on January 9, a breakthrough in high-level North-South negotiations at Panmunjom yielded the reinstatement of a military hotline between the two sides, accompanied by North Korea's official agreement to participate in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games.²⁴ The flurry of diplomatic exchanges eventually brought Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, as well as North Korea's ceremonial head of state, Kim Yong-nam, in a high-level visit to South Korea; the former delivered a personal invitation to South Korean President Moon Jae-in to visit Pyongyang for talks with Kim Jong-un.²⁵ Just under two months later, this culminated in the third historic inter-Korean summit on April 27, 2018 at Panmunjom. The summit outcome document, formally titled the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, included a clause affirming "the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula."²⁶ The distinction between the two-year crisis period from 2016-2017 and the immediate post-crisis period from January to April 2018 provides the basis for analyzing the nuclear debate in the following sections.

2. Methodology and Analysis of the Contemporary Debate

To assess the contemporary South Korean debate over nuclear weaponization, the author examined two sets of newspaper articles by the three most circulated English and Korean daily newspapers, as reported by the Korea Audit Bureau of Certification. The English-language papers included *The Korea Herald*, *The Korea Times*, and *Korea JoongAng Daily*; the Korean-language papers included *Chosun Ilbo*, *DongA Ilbo*, and *JoonAng Ilbo*.²⁷ The first set of articles corresponded to the crisis period and included a total of 723 articles (323 English and 400 Korean) published from January 2016 to December 2017. The second set corresponded to the immediate post-crisis period, including a markedly reduced sample size of 27 articles (11 English and 16 Korean) published from January 2018 through the end of April 2018.

23 "Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address," Korean Central News Agency, January 1, 2018, available on <http://www.kcna.kp/kcna.user.home.retrieveHomeInfoList.kcmsf>.

24 "North Korea to send team to Winter Olympic Games," BBC News, January 9, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-42600550>.

25 Anna Fifield and Ashley Parker, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un invites South Korea's president to Pyongyang," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-has-invited-south-koreas-moon-jae-in-to-pyongyang/2018/02/10/d7db9dde-0ddd-11e8-998c-96deb18cca19_story.html.

26 Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, Ministry of Unification, April 30, 2018, http://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/releases/?boardId=bbs_000000000000034&mode=view&cntId=54179.

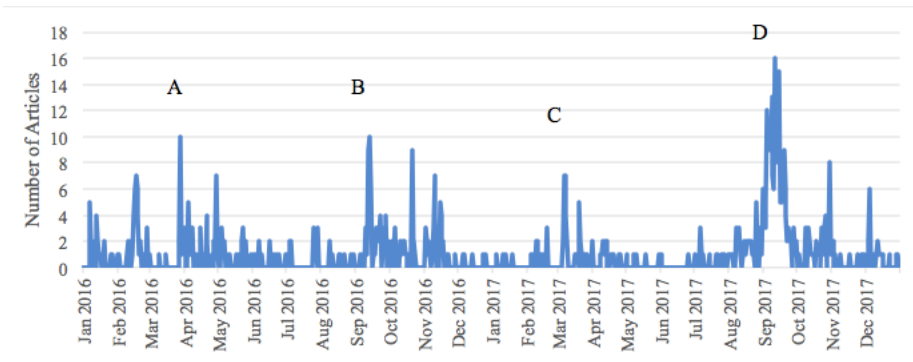
27 "2017 nyön (2016 nyöndobun) ilgan sinmun 163 kaesa injüngbusu," Korea Audit Bureau of Certification, May 10, 2018, available from <http://www.kabc.or.kr/about/notices/100000002541>.

For both sample sets, the author used the Dow Jones Factiva database to identify articles with the following terms: “South Korea” AND (“nuclear weapons” OR “nukes”) for English newspapers; and (“hanguk” OR “taehanminguk” OR “uri nara”) AND (“haengmugi” OR “chönsulhaek” OR “haengmujang”) for Korean newspapers. The data was then coded with the following research questions in mind for each respective period: When and in response to what events has the topic of nuclearization gained public attention? Was the debate centred primarily on domestic nuclear weapons or the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons? Finally, what arguments were made, and under what security narratives were these framed? These questions are addressed in the following sections.

2.1 Analyzing the Crisis Period

Using the frequency at which the sample texts were published, it is possible to contextualize the debate in relation to key events from the 2016–2017 crisis period. Figure 3 shows the volume of newspaper articles on South Korean nuclear armament by date from January 2016 through December 2017.

Figure 3 – Volume of Articles related to South Korean Nuclearization, by date (2016–2017)



The data suggests that debate over nuclear weapons was sporadic rather than sustained, based around four major events labelled A through D. Each of these events are characterized by a sudden increase in the volume of articles, followed by a steady decline in the preceding weeks.

The period labelled ‘A’ takes place in late March 2016 and coincides with remarks made by then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. Discussing his foreign policy in an interview with the *New York Times* on March 26, Trump stated he may be open to South Korea and Japan having their own nuclear arsenals, in addition to the pos-

sible withdrawal of US troops from the region. These remarks were widely reported in both the English and Korean-language newspapers. In response, Korea JoongAng Daily issued an editorial calling Trump's views "myopic" and asking Trump to "refrain from his penny-wise and pound-foolish approach."²⁸ An opinion piece by Chosun Ilbo's Lim Min-hyuk on April 5, 2016 suggested Trump's rhetoric of Korea as a "free rider" created a major challenge for South Korean foreign affairs and alliance relations with the U.S.²⁹ In July 2016, former Saenuri Party floor leader Won Yoo-chul cited Trump's remarks as a pretext for justifying South Korea's nuclear armament on the grounds that they posed a major challenge to South Korea's existing national security framework.³⁰ This notion of failing U.S. extended deterrence featured prominently among the calls for South Korean nuclearization.

The period labelled 'B' occurred in the aftermath of North Korea's fifth nuclear test on September 9, 2016. Much of the reports from the sample focused on a renewed push from the conservative bloc in favour of nuclearization. On September 12, 2016 the Korea Times reported calls from key Saenuri Party leaders, such as Chairman Lee Jung-hyun and former chairman Kim Moo-sung, for a redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons and a renegotiation of the Korea-U.S. atomic energy agreement.³¹ That month also saw the formation of the South Korean Nuclear Research Group (Uri haek yŏngu hoe) composed of various security, nuclear, and North Korea experts in favor of nuclearization.³²

The period labelled 'C' coincided with the launching of four ballistic missiles by North Korea on March 6, 2017. This was followed by reports of how the leading candidates for the upcoming South Korean presidential elections responded to the provocation, with Gyeonggi Province Governor and conservative Bareun Party representative Nam Kyung-pil using the event as a pretext for U.S. tactical nuclear weapons redeployment.³³ A DongA Ilbo editorial also used the occasion to call for a greater show of force from the US-South Korea alliance, echoing calls for U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, in addition to

28 "Dangerous remarks from Trump," Korea JoongAng Daily, March 28, 2016, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3016744>.

29 Lim Min-hyök, "[Tesükü esö] Han'guk ap e 'T'ürömp'ü sihömdae," Chosun Ilbo, April 5, 2016, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/04/04/2016040402881.html.

30 Yeo Jun-suk, "Former Saenuri whip repeats nuclear arms call," The Korea Herald, July 25, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160725000734>.

31 Kim Hyo-jin, "Key Saenuri Party members back nuclear armament," The Korea Times, September 12, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/09/485_214009.html.

32 Chu Söng-ha, "Han'guk tokcha haengmujangttaen NPT t'alt'ohaeya...kukche chejae kamdang üimun," DongA Ilbo, September 12, 2016, <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20160912/80254560/1>.

33 Jun Ji-hye, "Presidential contenders slam N. Korea missile test in unison," The Korea Times, March 6, 2017, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/03/356_225155.html.

further deployments of US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) batteries.³⁴

The final period, 'D', saw the greatest peak within the sample and corresponded to North Korea's largest nuclear test to date on September 3, 2017, along with its first reported ICBM launch less than two weeks later on September 15. As expected, these events prompted a massive backlash. A September 4 editorial by Chosun Ilbo claimed that dialogue, diplomacy, and other economic or military means of pressure had been exhausted, leaving only a balance of terror through nuclear redeployment as the only realistic response to these provocations.³⁵ A week after the test, The Korea Times reported that Liberty Korea Party Chairman Hong Joon-pyo launched a public petition with a goal of 10 million signatures in favor of tactical nuclear weapons redeployment.³⁶ JoongAng Ilbo also documented the visit to Washington DC by a delegation of LKP representatives to lobby for tactical nuclear weapons, garnering an audience with US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Joseph Yun, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of International Security and Non-proliferation Elliot Kang, Republican Senator Cory Gardner, and the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation President Edwin Feulner.³⁷

Examining these four major events within the identified crisis period, it appears debates over nuclearization in South Korea are strongly correlated with two factors. First are changes in the North Korean security front, with missile and nuclear tests providing the pretext and justification for a stronger military response within South Korea. The second factor is US foreign policy, specifically its involvement in the Northeast Asian security infrastructure, highlighting the inseparable nature of South Korean defence and US extended deterrence. Together, these two factors suggest a largely security-based, rather than normative framing of the nuclear issue in South Korean society.

2.2 Two 'Nuclearizations': Domestic versus Tactical

The bulk of the debate from 2016-2017, as captured in the data, centred on two forms of nuclearization: the development of a domestic nuclear weapons arsenal, and the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons. Within the 2-year span from 2016-2017, a total of 338 sources contained at least one normative statement (i.e. statements with a clear position either for or against nuclear weapons) pertaining to the development of a South Korean domestic nuclear weapons program while 264 sources contained similar state-

34 "[Sasöl] Puk üi ittan misail tobal, 'Han-Mi tongmaeng üi him' poyöjül ttaeda," DongA Ilbo, March 6, 2017. <http://news.donga.com/3/04/20170306/83197643/1>.

35 "[Sasöl] Mun taet'ongnyöng kungmin ap e söso Taehan Min'guk kal kil palk'yödalla," Chosun Ilbo, September 5, 2017, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/09/04/2017090402785.html.

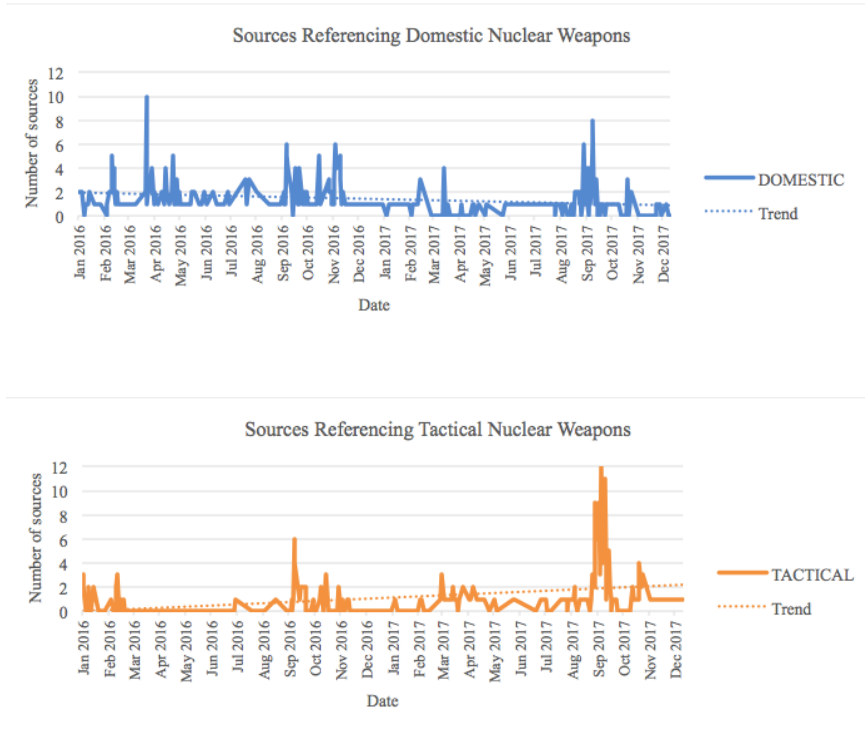
36 Choi Ha-young, "LKP leader's 'nuclear drive' draws concerns," The Korea Times, September 12, 2017, http://www.korea-times.co.kr/www/news/nation/2017/09/356_236292.html.

37 Kim Hyön-ki, "Chayuhan'guktang üiwön tül, chönsurhaek chaebaech'i Miguk e kongsik yochöng," JoongAng Ilbo, September 15, 2017, <http://news.joins.com/article/21940427>.

ments pertaining to the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons. Using the frequency of these sources plotted over time as a proxy for their salience in the public discourse, figures 4 and 5 illustrate the trends in the debates for each nuclearization option.

While debate over both options was relatively sustained through the entire crisis period, there was a slight shift within the sample over time away from domestic nuclear weapons and towards greater discussion of U.S. tactical weapons. The initial emphasis on domestic weapons may have been influenced by President Trump’s statements suggesting South Korea and Japan develop their own nuclear weapons. However, recognition of the diplomatic and economic risks involved in developing a domestic nuclear weapons capability may have pushed the debate toward tactical nuclear weapons instead. The changes that occurred following the crisis would shift debate in largely different direction.

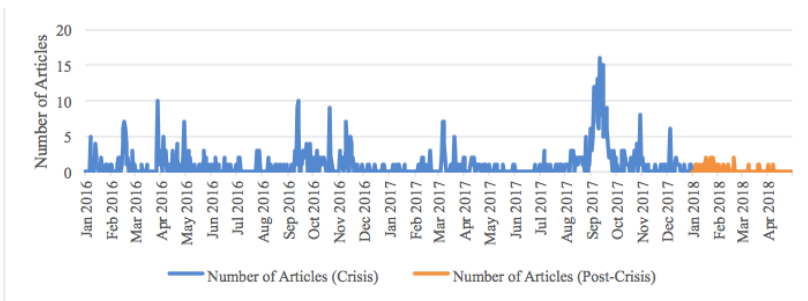
Figures 4 & 5 – Number of sources referencing domestic nuclear weapons vs. tactical nuclear weapons, by date



3. Examining the Post-Crisis Debate

The post-crisis debate presented a starkly different image from that of the crisis period. Sustained debate—or even discussion—of South Korea’s nuclearization drastically declined during this period. While the low sample size of the post-crisis period made it difficult to make in-depth qualitative comparisons, quantitatively, the comparison is rather telling. Figure 6 compares the volume of articles by date during the crisis period (January 2016 – December 2018) and the immediate post-crisis period (January – April 2018).

Figure 6 - Volume of Articles related to South Korean Nuclearization, by date (January 2016 - April 2018)



In the immediate post-crisis period, there was minimal discussion on South Korean nuclearization among the sample newspapers with an average of 6.75 articles per month (27 articles over 4 months). This is contrasted with the crisis period, during which there was an average of 30.12 articles per month (723 articles over 24 months). Within the immediate post-crisis period itself, there was a notable decrease in the volume of articles over time, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1 - Volume of Articles by Newspaper in Immediate Post-Crisis Period, by month

Newspaper	January	February	March	April
Korea Herald	2	0	0	0
Korea Times	1	0	0	1
Korea JoongAng Daily	3	3	0	0
Chosun Ilbo	4	0	2	0
DongA Ilbo	0	0	0	0
JoongAng Ilbo	5	3	1	1
Monthly Total	15	6	3	2

While fifteen newspaper articles pertaining to South Korean nuclearization were published in January, this decreased to six in February, further dropping to three in March, and only two in April. The disproportionately high number of articles in January could be explained by lingering skepticism over North Korea's diplomatic overtures during that period following Kim Jong-un's New Years address. However, as it became clear that North Korea was refraining from overt provocations—and amid North Korea's successful participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympic games in early February—it appears this skepticism subsided, and the nuclear option rapidly fell out of the public purview. By April signs indicated that the third Inter-Korean summit would proceed without incident and the question of South Korean nuclearization effectively became a moot point.

4. Framing the Debate: Security, Economic, and Normative Frames

Analyzing the various normative statements contained within the sample, it is possible to build an overview of the dominant arguments used in the nuclear debate during the most recent crisis period. These can be broken down into three types: security-based arguments, economic arguments, and normative arguments. The vast majority of the arguments fit within the first two categories, implying a strong perception of the nuclear question in terms of material factors—i.e. military and economic hard power—rather than ideational ones.

4.1 Security Frame

Virtually all the arguments on the pro-nuclear side of the debate fell within the security frame. At its most basic, this argument calls for the use of nuclear weapons to counter the North Korean threat. For instance, in the wake of North Korea's January 2016 nuclear test and long-range rocket launch the following February, Saenuri Party floor leader Won Yu-chul stated, "We have to take extraordinary measures to prepare for changes in security landscape... we have to think about measures to ensure the nation's survival including nuclear armament for self-defense."³⁸ Notions of the 'balance of terror (*kongp'o ūi kyunhyōng*)' and the 'nuclear hostage (*haek injil*)' regularly accompanied this argument. For instance, former Korea Herald editorialist Kim Myong-sik notes, "a balance of terror with the realization of apocalyptic retaliation can prevent an adventure by a dictator. This looks like the only feasible path we should take to meet the North Korean madness."³⁹ The second concept is generally projected as the ultimate result of South

38 Yeo Jun-suk, "Senior lawmaker urges government to seek regime change in North," The Korea Herald, February 15, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160215000948>.

39 Kim Myong-sik, "From fear, anger to stronger unity, resolve," The Korea Herald, February 17, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160217001054>.

Korea's failure to counter the North with its own nuclear weapons, as shown in a Chosun Ilbo editorial suggesting Kim Jong-un has already taken 50 million Koreans as 'nuclear hostages'.⁴⁰

Variations of this argument emphasize the failure of U.S. extended deterrence, international controls, diplomatic engagement, and the principle of denuclearization as necessitating the nuclear option to counter the North. In a Korea Herald interview, Saenuri lawmaker Won Yoo-chul claimed, "The US nuclear umbrella, which we see as protection, can be folded back anytime, and we just cannot borrow the umbrella whenever it rains."⁴¹ In the wake of North Korea's September 2017 nuclear test, LKP leader Hong Joon-pyo stated that "for the past twenty years, we have repeatedly turned to dialogue and sanctions. Nevertheless, North Korea has steadily been developing its nuclear weapons... at this point dialogue holds little meaning."⁴² Furthermore, writing for Dong A Ilbo, Choi Kang at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies noted that no matter how much South Korea adhered to the 1992 Joint Declaration on denuclearization, it was unlikely that North Korea would give up its own nuclear weapons.⁴³

A slightly different argument involve the use of nuclear weapons as a form of diplomatic leverage—albeit with the same end-goal of removing the North Korean nuclear threat. On the one hand, these nuclear weapons could be used as a negotiating card with North Korea, as suggested by Gyeonggi Province Governor and Bareun Party representative Nam Kyung-pil during his campaign pledge for the 2017 Presidential elections.⁴⁴ On the other hand, as advocated by Kim Tae-woo, former researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, nuclear weapons could be used not to pressure North Korea, but to pressure China, noting: "China's position in saying it will not acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear state while opposing the collapse of its leadership is hypocritical... if necessary, we must pressure China to fundamentally change its attitude with the nuclear card."⁴⁵

Not all the arguments within the defense-security frame were in favour of nuclear weapons: in fact, a couple major rebuttals against nuclearization fell within the security framework as well. First among these was the argument that nuclear weapons simply were

40 "[Sasöl] Puk 6-ch'a haeksirhöm, 5000-man i haek injil twaetta," Chosun Ilbo, September 4, 2017, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/09/03/2017090301724.html.

41 Yeo Jun-suk, "[Herald Interview] Former Saenuri whip says South Korea needs nukes," The Korea Herald, August 21, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160821000235>.

42 Choi Kyöng-un, "Hong Jun-p'yo 'Chöng' sö 5-tang taep'yo chöjöng? Tüllöri hoedam en an kanda," Chosun Ilbo, September 9, 2017, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/09/09/2017090900216.html.

43 Choi Kang, "[Tong'a kwangjang/Chöi Kang] Chönsurhaek chaebaech'i södüllöya hanün kkadalk," DongA Ilbo, March 18, 2017, http://news.donga.com/List/Series_7004010000019/3/7004010000019/20170318/83381634/1.

44 Pae Chae-söng, "Nam Kyöng-p'il 'Haengmujang junbi...2023-nyön put'ö mobyöngje' Anbo kongyak palp'yo," JoongAng Ilbo, February 19, 2017, <http://news.joins.com/article/21279814>.

45 Lee Süng-hön, "Chung kyönje wihan Mi üi chömdanjöllyök, Puk-haek taéüng edo hwaryonghaeya," DongA Ilb, July 4, 2016, <http://news.donga.com/Politics/BestClick/3/all/20160704/78998341/1>.

not necessary for South Korea's defense given that the U.S. extended deterrence system is already in place. While this argument was largely given by foreigners like USFK Commander Vincent Brooks and U.S. diplomat Marc Knapper, it was echoed by domestic proponents like presidential special advisor Moon Chung-in.⁴⁶ Relatedly, another major argument was the fear that a nuclear-armed South Korea would trigger a nuclear domino-effect across North East Asia, spreading as far as Japan and Taiwan.⁴⁷

4.2 Economic Frame

In addition to security-based concerns, a significant portion of the debate emphasized the economic and diplomatic ramifications of breaking the non-proliferation principle as a rationale to oppose South Korean nuclearization. The argument falling within this framework was exclusively anti-nuclear. For instance, Cha Doo-hyun from the Korea Institute for Defence Analyses noted that nuclearization would result in the blockage of American uranium supply with massive ramifications for Korea's energy industry.⁴⁸ Likewise, Bareun Party representative Ha Tae-kyung criticized the domestic nuclearization movement as 'nuclear populism,' explaining that doing so would effectively subject South Korea to the UN economic sanctions, much like North Korea.⁴⁹ Handong University professor Park Won-gon similarly noted that domestic nuclearization would result in South Korea's international isolation with larger ramifications given the scale of South Korea's heavily global-reliant economy.⁵⁰

4.3 Normative Frame

By far, the least employed argument was the use of norms to preclude the nuclear option altogether on ideational grounds. This line of debate was most evident in former President Park Geun-hye's stated principle of a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons.⁵¹ Building on this was the notion that gaining nuclear weapons acted as an implicit acknowledgement (and by extension, justification) for North Korea's nuclear weapons, undermining the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. While this argument was

46 "S. Korea's nuclear armament would make US safer: expert," The Korea Times, May 4, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/05/205_203995.html.

47 Ser Myo-ja, "Moon rules out nuclear weapons in South Korea," Korea JoongAng Daily, September 15, 2017, <http://korea-joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038452>.

48 Yi Yong-su, "'Hanguk haengmujang' pal ppaen T'ürömp'ü...Mi üi pihwaksan wönch'ik twijjipkin," Chosun Ilbo, November 15, 2016, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/11/15/2016111500193.html.

49 Oh Wön-sik, "Ha T'ae-kyöng 'Hong Jun-p'yo 'tokcha haengmujangnon' wihöm chönman...haek pöp'yullijüm," JoongAng Ilbo, September 16, 2017.

50 Yi Whan-woo, "NK test stirs call for nuclear armament," The Korea Times, January 18, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/01/180_195722.html.

51 Yoon Min-sik, "Park urges more aggressive role from China on North Korea's nuclear problem," The Korea Herald, January 13, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160113000648>.

also employed by the Park administration, it was especially prominent under the Moon administration. Speaking before the National Assembly in August 2017, Chung Eui-yong, head of the National Security Office of the Blue House, stated, “We will lose our justification for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula if we place tactical atomic weapons.” This position was later echoed by President Moon and Unification Minister Cho Myung-hyun in the following months.^{52,53,54} In a sense, however, this argument cycles back to security concerns rather than any fundamental ethical or moral reasoning behind non-proliferation: denuclearization is sought after not out of the unacceptability of their catastrophic impact or for its own sake, but rather specifically because, of the North Korean threat.

5. Implications and Conclusion

To nuclearize, or not to nuclearize: such is the perennial question within South Korea, for whom the nuclear option is not merely one of principle but one of existential threat. This debate came to a head from 2016 through the early part of 2018 amid unprecedented progress in North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic weapons capabilities. As shown in the analysis above, this period witnessed strong calls for South Korean nuclearization, largely—though not exclusively—from conservative lawmakers in government. Such calls depended heavily on a credible threat from North Korea and concerns over U.S. involvement in South Korea’s security infrastructure. However, for the time being, North Korea’s diplomatic about-face through the early portions of 2018 seem to have quelled such concerns.

In some ways, the debate appears to have passed completely. A number of positive historical developments have taken place on the Korean Peninsula since the third Inter-Korean summit: a surprise fourth summit in May 2018, the first ever U.S.-DPRK summit between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in June 2018, and the fifth and most recent inter-Korean summit in mid-September 2018. Within South Korea itself, the failure of the conservatives during the June 2018 local and gubernatorial elections witnessed the resignation of tactical nuclear weapons supporters Hong Joon-pyo and Yoo Seung-min, foreshadowing a possible shakeup of their respective parties and platforms.

However, as history has shown, diplomacy surrounding North Korea has regularly been a tentative business. Security and pragmatic concerns, particularly over North

52 Kim Hyun-ki and Ser Myo-ja, “Seoul asks for ‘strategic assets’ from U.S.,” Korea JoongAng Daily, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3037873>.

53 Yu Yong-wŏn and Kim Chin-myŏng, “Mi F-35B-B-1B p’yŏndae, silchŏn chŏrŏm Puk-kiji chŏngmilp’okkyŏk hullyŏn,” Chosun Ilbo, September 9, 2017, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/09/01/2017090100343.html.

54 Chŏng Yong-su, “Cho Myŏng-kyun T’ong’ilbu changgwan ‘Haŋguk chŏnsurhaek chaebaech’i hyŏnsilchŏk ūro pulganŭng,” JoongAng Ilbo, October 18, 2017, <http://news.joins.com/article/22023502>.

Korean provocations and US commitments to South Korean defense, have been the key drivers for South Korean nuclear discourse. Under the present geopolitical circumstances, both counts remain uncertain: it is unclear whether Kim Jong-un is intent on keeping his denuclearization agreements in the long run; U.S. security involvement on the Peninsula remains a sticking point for the peace process. While we may welcome the diplomatic developments on the Korean peninsula with cautious optimism, for South Korea, a country with a history of public nuclear support and breakout capacity, it remains a challenge to balance these two factors lest the question—to nuclearize, or not to nuclearize—linger in the public consciousness.

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