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Confronting the Nuclear Past and our Fears at the Same Time

South Korea is one of over 40 countries that could produce nuclear weapons but have remained non-nuclear. Seoul's alliance with the United States, commitment to peace on the Korean peninsula, and economic and political links to the rest of the world have made nuclear weapons irrelevant for its security and prosperity. Yet, information that South Korean experts engaged in secret nuclear activities as recently as 2000 poses some difficult choices for the government in Seoul and some important questions for the rest of the world.

The scale of the past nuclear activities must be kept in perspective. Neither the plutonium or uranium experiments have given South Korea an ability to produce nuclear weapons and there is no direct evidence that South Korea has restarted the secret nuclear program that existed in the 1970s. The International Atomic Energy Agency continues to investigate South Korea's past activities and it is critical that Seoul provide the agency with its full cooperation. Only by demonstrating that is nothing left to hide can South Korea reassure its friends about its true nuclear intentions. Such reassurance is critical if South Korea wants to make progress on bringing North Korea's nuclear weapon and other dangerous programs to an end.

South Korea's nuclear activities no matter how small - are a violation of its legal commitments to the IAEA and under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As a country dedicated to the rule of law, South Korea should be anxious to demonstrate that it takes these actions seriously. Making the scientists who conducted the work available and fully cooperative with the IAEA is essential and punishing the officials who authorized the experiments may also be required. In the end, Seoul may even have to accept IAEA Board of Governors and UN Security Council resolutions noting the past violations. There is no risk that these would include any penalties or sanctions for these activities, and should also make note of South Korea's subsequent cooperation. This is the same course of action taken when it was revealed the former Romanian government has pursued secret nuclear activities, and a UNSC resolution with no sanctions put an end to the whole affair.

There will be some who believe that the recent disclosures about South Korea's past nuclear activities are the tip of a nuclear iceberg in South Korea. [NOTE TO INSUN IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A GOOD WAY TO TRANSLATE THIS INTO KOREAN YOU CAN SAY "THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL BELIEVE, DESPITE THE LACK OF SUPPORTING EVIDENCE, THAT THE RECENT DISCLOSURES ARE ONLY A SMALL PART OF A LARGER, STILL HIDDEN NUCLEAR PROGRAM IN SOUTH KOREA"] Only full cooperation with the IAEA can

disprove these conspiracies.

These are, by any measure, trying times in East Asia. North Korea has been able to resist international pressure and continues to advance its nuclear ambitions at a time when the US-South Korean alliance is undergoing unprecedented challenges, compounded by the instability and uncertainty caused by the realignment and reduction of US troops in South Korea. Under these circumstances, people might not be surprised by South Korea reconsidering its nuclear options. The collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the 1992 North-South Denuclearization, Iran 's continued pursuit of nuclear technology and concerns about the future direction of US foreign policy have weakened the strength of the system that seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. While Seoul would be demonstrably less secure should it ever decide to build nuclear weapons, people under threat and losing faith in its friends sometimes consider even dangerous options to defend themselves.

Many nuclear experts believe the world is at a nuclear tipping point. If the nuclear efforts of North Korea and Iran can be stopped, then the global nonproliferation regime can be strengthened and the international role of nuclear weapons diminished. However, if either North Korea or Iran succeed in their efforts to become nuclear weapon states, then the world could see a new wave of proliferation that might include Egypt, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Syria and even South Korea. This concern, despite the small amounts of nuclear materials produced by South Korea, helps explain why the revelations have received so much attention and sparked such concern.

Thus, South Korea and its friend, including the United States, must work cooperative to repair those systems that have helped keep the number of nuclear weapons low and keep peace on the Korean peninsula for the past 50 years. Key to this repairing the US-ROK military and political alliance. For too long, the leaders and populations of both states have allowed the basis for the relationship democracy, economic ties and links in population to be taken for granted. Moreover, the military relationship must be constantly reassessed and reassured so that both populations have confidence in the commitment of their partners. But this process must begin with the government in Seoul accepting what has happened and working to reassure the US and the world that these programs are not only isolated, but taking steps to ensure they can never reoccur. Only then can the allies re-engage the critical international efforts with North Korea and prevent a more dangerous world from emerging.

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