

US and South Korea Agree to Co-Design Nuclear Weapons Policy Five Years After Panmunjom Declaration

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The US will work alongside South Korea to develop a strategic nuclear policy and frequently station nuclear weapon-armed submarines on the peninsula, according to an agreement [announced](#) by the White House marking the first visit of the new South Korean president to the US.

Released on Wednesday, before the East Room was festooned with guests watching President Yoon Suk-yeol sing The Day the Music Died karaoke style, it marks the first time that US nuclear warheads will be present on the Korean Peninsula since they were removed in 1991, and the first outright departure from commitments to reduce the reliance on deterrence with nuclear weapons.

It also came, unlikely by chance, on the 5-year anniversary of the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration between former President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Jung-un.

That was the closest the Korean Peninsula had come to peace since the Korean War was concluded with a ceasefire in 1953, and the closest to a denuclearized Korea since the North first got the bomb sometime between when it left the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, and its first detonation in 2006.

"US officials said the nuclear-armed submarines will only 'visit' South Korea and that the US won't permanently deploy nukes to the country," [reports Antiwar news editor Dave DeCamp](#). "But under the deal, the temporary deployment of US strategic assets to the peninsula will become much more frequent".

The deal stipulates that South Korea will not seek to individually obtain nuclear weapons, something which President Yoon mused about earlier in his presidency, but which the Blue

House walked back.

Atoms for survival

The North Korean state is often referred to as “rogue” vis-à-vis the international community. But they aren’t madmen or fools. They knew the only way their regime could survive Washington’s unipolar moment following the collapse of their Soviet benefactors was to harness the power of the atom bomb.

The easiest comparison to make to understand their thinking is looking at the current North Korean dictatorship, which got nukes and is still around, and compare it to the Libyan dictatorship, which had chemical weapons, got rid of them around the same time that North Korea left the NPT to pursue nukes, and was overthrown by America under Obama.

South Korea on the other hand has for some time polled strongly in favor of establishing independent nuclear capabilities, and the [New York Times suggests](#) that Yoon is looking to assuage those in favor with this cooperative strategy with the US – amounting to what is essentially a carbon-copy of the NATO nuclear weapons sharing agreement.

South Korea is part of the NPT, so in principle there’s no reason to think public pressure could change the status quo there. North Korea is the only country that’s ever left the NPT having first ratified it.

The bigger concern should be, with nuclear weapons coming in and out of harbor in the South, to what degree does this agreement escalate tensions, reduce the future chances for better North-South cooperation, and increase the risk of a nuclear accident?

There’s always a risk when nuclear weapons are present in a geopolitical conflict zone, but with the existing conventional forces aimed at the North, the deterrence against a disarming nuclear first strike by Kim Jung-UN remains high.

Countering Trump

What is always the biggest risk, and what Daniel Ellsberg details so well in his 2021 book *The Doomsday Machine*, is the risk in these situations for a nuclear accident, or an unauthorized launch, particularly in the midst of other crises and communications disruptions.

On this front, the greater presence of nuclear weapons on the peninsula will do nothing to make the peninsula safer for the North and the South.

Much was made at the White House about the date being the 70th anniversary of the first alliance between the South Koreans and the US.

What the deal more likely represents is an attempt to rubber-stamp the military-industrial complex’s rejection of former President Trump’s notion, a notion that was realized five years ago today, that the way in which the peninsula could be made safer is through reduced sanctions, reduced military drills and buildup, and more cross-Korean dialogue.

With Donald Trump and Joe Biden having already announced their candidacies for the 2024 Presidential Election, making the American people’s latest memory of the stalemate in Korea be Yoon singing karaoke after agreeing to allow more US military involvement in the

peninsula, is how the Biden team believes they can erase any memories of what was certainly one of the most significant events in the Trump presidency – that like Alexander the Great, he was almost able to cut the Gordian Knot of the Korean War.

The pictures of Trump, President Moon, and Chairman Kim shaking hands and crossing the turquoise border on the DMZ, and the later images of Kim clasping hands with Moon in the Blue House, having just signed an agreement to formally end the Korean War and begin talks on a stepwise disarmament effort, were exceptionally powerful images that sat on the front pages of every major news outlet on the planet for a week.

It's a legacy that Biden hoped no doubt to erase with this recent agreement. More his part, Biden made a point in a statement on the meeting that he remains committed to negotiation with the North, and invites them back to the table. But that's a lie, or at least foolish to say, because he's "committed" absolutely nothing to the effort; not as president, nor as a senator.

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Featured image: Trump and Kim meet Sunday before Trump became first US president to step on North Korean territory. (White House photo)

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