



## **Friendly Proliferation: Will US Asian Allies Get Their Own Nukes?**

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### **Abstract**

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As America prepares for a new presidential administration, Asian allies are weighing options regarding their own regional security and the extent of U.S. security umbrella – including acquiring nuclear weapons. In the face of a rising China, nuclearizing North Korea, declining U.S. resources, and increasing allied calls to go nuclear, defense planners are weighing the option of placing tactical nuclear weapons in Taiwan and South Korea as a way to deter their own covert indigenous programs, thereby allowing the international community to continue to uphold the global non-proliferation regime.

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## Analysis

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As America prepares for a new presidential administration, Asian allies are weighing options regarding their own regional security in the face of a rising China and nuclearizing North Korea, and the extent of U.S. security umbrella.

One of these options is acquiring nuclear weapons.

In a 30 December *Foreign Policy* article, Doug Bandow, a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, argued that in a post-Covid pandemic world where the U.S. budget deficit may run up to \$16 trillion in the coming decade, allies need to help pick up the tab for their own security.<sup>1</sup>

Bandow argued that instead of expensive weapons platforms to *project power*, U.S. should shift to a posture of *deterrence* and allow allies to acquire their own nuclear weapons. In what he describes as “friendly proliferation”, Bandow observed that current policy ironically ensures countries such as China, North Korea, Pakistan hold nuclear weapons while democratic allies are banned, and as such U.S. should allow friendly allies to proliferate in order to level the playing field.

Interestingly, this is not a fringe argument, but one that has been seriously debated in allied countries.

### Majority of South Koreans want nuclear weapons

In a 2019 *Japan Times* editorial, former South Korean foreign minister Song Min-soon argued “It’s necessary for South Korea to move to a self-reliant alliance from a dependent alliance...a defense nuclear capability, with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula...”<sup>2</sup>

The majority of South Koreans share his view. In a 2017 Gallup poll, a whopping 60% of South Koreans support Seoul acquiring an independent nuclear deterrent, as a result of disillusionment due to several failed rounds of North-South negotiations and decades of North Korean military buildup.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in the aftermath of the Obama/Biden administration’s violent regime-change policies in Libya, Syria and Yemen, the prospect of North Korean denuclearization has more or less been foreclosed. Noting the Libyan model of Gaddafi giving up his nuclear weapons program in 2003 in exchange for economic integration with the West, only to be invaded eight years later, the lessons learned for Pyongyang is that in order to deter a military invasion, a country needs to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup>

And this same lesson is not lost on U.S. allies.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Bandow, “America’s Asian Allies Need Their Own Nukes”, *Foreign Policy*, December 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/30/nuclear-weapons-china-great-power-competition-asia/>

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Johnson, “South Korea developing its own nukes one solution to U.S. cost-sharing demands, ex-top diplomat says”, *Japan Times*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/12/asia-pacific/nuclear-weapons-cost-sharing-south-korea/#.XOWGzC1q2fB>

<sup>3</sup> Byong Chul Lee, “Don’t be surprised when South Korea wants nuclear weapons”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 23, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/10/dont-be-surprised-when-south-korea-wants-nuclear-weapons/>; Mark Episcopos, “South Korea: The Next Nuclear Weapons State?” *The National Interest*, August 26, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/south-korea-next-nuclear-weapons-state-167803>

<sup>4</sup> Megan Specia and David Sanger, “How the ‘Libyan Model’ became a sticking point in North Korea Nuclear Talks”, *New York Times*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/world/asia/north-korea-libya-model.html>



## Debates on Taiwan's nuclear deterrent

Taiwan's nuclear program goes back to 1964 when China tested its first nuclear device. From Taipei's perspective, a nuclear arsenal is the ultimate guarantor of sovereignty, in the event U.S. abandons Taipei as it did in 1979 and switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing.<sup>5</sup>

The Taiwan bomb program began in 1967 but was halted by the CIA in 1988. However, recently there has been renewed debate in the U.S. for Taipei to acquire a nuclear arsenal.

Writing in a December 2019 *Taipei Times* article, Ian Easton from Project 2049 Institute, a think tank with closed ties to the Pentagon that is focused on U.S. and cross-strait relations, argued that Taiwan needs nuclear weapons for self-defense, given it shares the same predicament with Israel that lacks a mutual defense treaty with Washington, and thus lies outside of U.S. security umbrella.<sup>6</sup>

This vulnerability was highlighted during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, when Chinese authorities detonated two nuclear devices and mocked Americans that "In the end, you care a lot more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei."<sup>7</sup>

However, others do not support Taiwan having an indigenous program, and rather propose putting U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on the island as a deterrent.<sup>8</sup> Michael Rubin from the American Enterprise Institute suggested Taiwan follow the South Korea model, wherein from 1958-1991, U.S. placed over 100 nuclear warheads in the Korean peninsula.<sup>9</sup>

## Japan's bomb in the basement

As for Japan, it is already a *de facto* nuclear power through its civilian nuclear program, and can build a bomb in six months.<sup>10</sup> However, whether it has the will to go nuclear depends on Tokyo's confidence in US extended deterrence, which would likely erode given America's domestic challenges and tremendous debt burden in the next decade.<sup>11</sup>

## Friendly proliferation?

Given the relative decline of America's power projection capabilities, growing debt burden, and rise of Asian powers, Asian allies are realizing they need to step up to the plate and rethink their own security posture.

<sup>5</sup> Kyle Mikozami, "China's Greatest Nightmare: Taiwan Armed with Nuclear Weapons", *The National Interest*, March 4, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/chinas-greatest-nightmare-taiwan-armed-nuclear-weapons-19661>

<sup>6</sup> Ian Easton, "Ian Easton on Taiwan: Taiwan's Nuclear Weapons Problem", *Taipei Times*, March 4, 2019, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2019/03/04/2003710796>; Project 2049 Institute <https://project2049.net>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2019/03/04/2003710796>

<sup>8</sup> Michael Rubin, "Why Taiwan needs Nuclear Weapons", *The National Interest*, May 31, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-taiwan-needs-nuclear-weapons-159261>

<sup>9</sup> Hans Kristensen, Robert Norris, "A History of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in South Korea", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 2, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/11/a-history-of-us-nuclear-weapons-in-south-korea/>

<sup>10</sup> Robert Windrem, "Japan Has Nuclear 'Bomb in the Basement', and China isn't Happy", *CNBC*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.cbc.com/2014/03/11/japans-bomb-in-the-basement.html>

<sup>11</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, "How Japan Could Go Nuclear", *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2019-10-03/how-japan-could-go-nuclear>



As South Korea's retired lieutenant general In-Bum Chun noted, in the face of a nuclear North Korea "all options are on the table", and perhaps "reintroducing tactical U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea becomes an option."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, with the trend likely leaning towards proliferation in Asia, perhaps putting tactical nuclear weapons in allied countries is a preferred option to having their own indigenous program, and thereby allow the international community to continue to uphold the global non-proliferation regime.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on January 9, 2021.

#### About the Author of this Issue

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Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane's Information Group's Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



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<sup>12</sup> Jeff Daniels, "South Koreans want their own nuclear weapons but doing so risk triggering a wider war", *CNBC*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/24/south-koreans-want-their-own-nukes-but-doing-so-risks-wider-war.html>