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If South Korea is inching toward a nuclear program, it becomes imperative for the U.S. to step up education and consultation to avoid the further untethering of the nuclear order

by **Clint Work**

The trends driving the U.S.-ROK alliance to enhance cooperation around extended deterrence and establish the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in 2023—advancing North Korean capabilities, increasingly virulent threats, and a worsening strategic environment—have only accelerated and, with greater North Korean-Russian cooperation, expanded. Such trends naturally motivate further strengthening of the NCG. So, too, does the shadow of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Given growing concerns that Trump’s return to the White House would undermine efforts to institutionalize the NCG, officials are moving to secure “substantive progress in an expedited manner” in the first half of 2024, according to the joint press statement following the second NCG meeting held in Washington in December.

Following that meeting, ROK Deputy National Security Adviser Kim Tae-hyo said that U.S. and ROK officials “agreed to complete guidelines regarding the planning and operation of a nuclear strategy by the middle of next year.” In his New Year’s Day address, President Yoon Suk-yeol remarked: “By the first half of this year, we will complete the enhanced South Korea-U.S. extended deterrence system to fundamentally deter any North Korean nuclear and missile threats.” Reinforcing the message, ROK Minister of Defense Shin Won-shik stated the commitments outlined in the Washington Declaration would be “cemented” this coming summer. Joint nuclear deterrence against North Korea will be “institutionalized” and “signed into measures of irreversibility.” Yet the insistence with which such statements are made reveals the fragility of the enterprise.

Although new bureaucratic processes (i.e., the NCG’s workstreams) take time and deliberation to set up, alliance managers must avoid allowing the process itself to take the place of concrete outcomes. Such a dynamic could undermine expectations and cause alliance fissures. Furthermore, this applies to ROK nuclear education and training, a potentially promising yet little-covered area

that grew out of President Yoon's April 2023 State Visit and the Washington Declaration.

Process Is Necessary But Not Sufficient

What exactly the completed guidelines will look like and how North Korea will be fundamentally deterred remains unclear. After all, deterrence is never a finished equation; it's an iterative dynamic driven by allies' and adversaries' constantly evolving capabilities, postures, and signals. There's no endpoint. Statements about making substantive progress and completing enhancements serve political purposes and may offer short-term reassurances. Yet, ultimately, the devil is in the details: what is really being done that is new and different and that can be sustained? And how is it communicated to the South Korean public and North Korea (and others) in a credible manner? Furthermore, saying alliance commitments and joint efforts will be cemented and made irreversible belies the history of the alliance's consultative architecture.

To be fair, it's understandable that the NCG's various workstreams on bolstering nuclear deterrence and response capabilities are being established gradually, particularly if they will achieve new levels of alliance cooperation and consultation surrounding the planning and operation of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment to South Korea. It bears mention that during much of the Cold War, only the ROK president—with no other South Korean personnel present—spoke to American officials about U.S. nuclear weapons, and even those conversations were rudimentary. The alliance has progressed significantly since then.

Yet only in 2010 did the alliance formally establish a consultative body on extended deterrence. Even then, the U.S. provided relatively limited info from their side of the equation (i.e., nuclear) and put more effort into better understanding and shaping the ROK's conventional capabilities and counter-

provocation plans. Building greater trust and navigating institutional and psychological barriers to information sharing proved challenging, even as the alliance's consultative architecture on extended deterrence evolved and expanded over the 2010s.

It didn't help that electoral turnover in both countries—and the mismatched priorities and ideological differences between the Moon and Trump administrations—caused such consultative bodies to either cease meeting or operate in dysfunctional ways just as they were supposed to be moving toward deeper levels of cooperation. ROK officials had wondered about the adequacy of alliance consultative mechanisms during stable times in the mid-2010s. Such skepticism only worsened with an advancing North Korean threat and a more unstable and complex strategic environment. So, with a Biden administration committed to strengthening alliances, the Yoon team embraced reenergizing existing bodies and pushed for more robust arrangements.

The Yoon administration's push for creating the NCG was partly political, to achieve a level of alliance consultation surpassing all previous ROK administrations' efforts and communicate to a domestic audience. However, the effort was also driven by a worsening North Korean threat and the fact that the dysfunction and limits within the existing consultative architecture were linked to broader doubts about the credibility and nature of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. The NCG would hopefully result in a new level of ROK understanding and involvement in the operation of U.S. extended deterrence.

Following the Washington Declaration, the floodgates opened. Spurred by the public signaling about a new level of joint decision-making under the NCG, working-level officials throughout the U.S. interagency were beset by unrealistic notions that somehow the alliance was headed toward some sort of nuclear sharing and that the ROK would be made privy to and given agency surrounding U.S. nuclear targeting and employment. Yet, as often happens, topline

pronouncements and the text of joint statements met the brass tacks of what was and what was not yet (and maybe never would be) possible.

The risk the alliance faces is having a new set of bureaucratic processes stand in for substantive outcomes. Surely, the process is critical. The frequent meetings of the NCG Working Group (WG) on NCG workstreams between the first and second NCG meetings—including guidelines; security and information sharing protocols; nuclear consultation processes in crises and contingencies; nuclear and strategic planning; U.S.- ROK conventional and nuclear integration (CNI); strategic communications; exercises, simulations, training, and investment activities; and risk reduction practices—points to an array of new or deeper areas of consultation.

But frequent meetings (i.e., process) do not necessarily indicate progress. Furthermore, overselling what can be achieved in a matter of months and talking in terms of irreversible steps risks creating unrealistic expectations. If the much-touted process produces less than substantive outcomes, such expectations could be dashed. It would be uncharitable to refer to the Washington Declaration as an empty scrap of paper, as did some ROK conservative critics immediately following its release. Still, dashed expectations could lead to displeasure that leaks out and breathes life into these critiques. Only so many times can the alliance upgrade its consultative architecture and have those efforts prove less than advertised before a growing number of ROK voices push for greater hedging and independence in the nuclear arena.

ROK Nuclear Education and Training

In addition to the workstreams above, ROK education and training on nuclear deterrence is another promising area for alliance cooperation that may help build a more sustainable and institutionalized structure underpinning the NCG. Yet, it's potentially subject to the same risks above.

Originally featured in the Fact Sheet from the ROK State Visit to the United States in April 2023, ROK nuclear education has received little to no coverage since. The fact sheet stated that to enhance ROK preparedness for nuclear threat scenarios, the United States welcomed participation by ROK military personnel in Department of Defense courses and trainings, which would focus on how the alliance approaches nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula, including through conventional-nuclear integration. According to those familiar with the drafting of the language on nuclear education in the fact sheet, much remained to be done.

There was no public mention of nuclear education and training during last July's inaugural NCG meeting. Still, the second meeting's joint press statement commended holding an "Extended Nuclear Deterrence Immersion Course... which was provided for officials from across the ROK interagency, and the substantive interagency cooperation being practiced through the NCG." Reports noted fifteen ROK officials had received education on the U.S. nuclear policy, strategy, and planning, and the United States had agreed at the second NCG meeting to provide further "in-depth" nuclear education to South Korean officials this year. "To put it simply," Kim Tae-hyo said, "our side's nuclear 'IQ' will continue to grow."

One wonders, though, about the content of the education. If centered on CNI, is the education mostly about a U.S.-ROK alliance version of NATO's Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics (SNOWCAT), whereby the ROK assists in nuclear missions through conventional air support? Recent alliance exercises indicate more such activities are afoot. However, the ROK's conventional support for U.S. nuclear operations is not the same as joint decision-making about nuclear employment.

If the education goes beyond this, what is the level of detail involved? Is it more advanced than what could be found in open-source materials on U.S. nuclear

policy, strategy, and planning, about which much info is readily accessible even to a cursory internet search? If not, what is the value? Is the value merely the optics of official-level educational efforts around such issues rather than the substantive content? If so, that would seem to provide diminishing returns as it becomes clear that info-sharing continues to face stark limits.

Alternatively, if deeper levels of info-sharing are meant to be instituted, that raises other questions: What are the barriers to information-sharing to overcome? What vetting processes and security clearances are needed? Is the Department of Defense willing to grant those clearances and share information in new ways with ROK officials? Are these to be one-off courses, with a new group cycling in each time, or is a core group of ROK officials repeatedly returning to new and deeper iterations of the course, building knowledge and trust with their American counterparts over time? Assuming barriers can be overcome and sustained rather than a cursory approach is adopted, such education and training could help build successive cohorts of nuclear operators that could help staff a standing body or permanent office, something akin to the NATO Nuclear Planning Group's Staff Group.

Over time, the alliance could explore expanding the pool of candidates to include additional civilian defense, foreign affairs, and other civilian officials. In addition to developing a dedicated and continuous cohort of staffers for a standing NCG body or office, the alliance might explore creating a senior advisory body for the NCG. To extend the European analogy, this would be akin to the NATO NPG High Level Group (HLG). NCG's senior advisory body would be composed of national policymakers and other experts from both Washington and Seoul. Together, they would discuss aspects of the NCG's nuclear policy and planning and issues concerning the effectiveness of U.S. extended deterrence. It seems most likely that this would have to fold into existing standing bodies, such as the

Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG), Deterrence Strategy Committee, and Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD).

The point is that process matters but only insofar as it contributes to more tangible outcomes. For some, the Washington Declaration was a short-term solution to a fundamental dilemma of ROK insecurity and fear of abandonment by the United States. It bought some space and time, yet ultimately, it is too little, too late. According to this view, the ROK indigenous nuclear genie is coming out of the bottle, if gradually and fitfully for now. That view may be correct. If so, it makes pursuing more in-depth education and consultation even more important. These steps could buy more time, reduce the chances of a further untethering of the nuclear order, and help the alliance navigate the rough waters ahead.

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