



Ostasien Aktuell

Working Paper No. 18

AN IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE?: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF SOUTH KOREA'S INDEPENDENT NUCLEAR ARMS IN YOUNG MIN

Politics

Title: An Impossible Choice?: Past, Present, and Future of South Korea's Independent Nuclear Arms

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Ostasien Aktuell Working Paper Series No. 18

Date of publication: 04.2022

The publication of this working paper was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2019-INC-2230004)

OAWP Series

Institute of Chinese Studies, Heidelberg University

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ISSN: 2627-9649

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Zusammenfassung

Trotz der Nuklearisierung Nordkoreas hat sich Seoul nicht nur seine eigenen Optionen für Nuklearwaffen nicht verfolgt, sondern, was noch interessanter ist, es gab auch keine nennenswerte öffentliche Debatte über die strategische Option, eine unabhängige nukleare Abschreckung aufzubauen. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird in diesem Papier versucht, mögliche Ursachen für die fehlende öffentliche Debatte über Atomwaffen in Südkorea zu ermitteln. Was ist die Ursache für den relativen Mangel an öffentlichen Diskussionen über die Option von Nuklearwaffen in Südkorea angesichts der Eskalation der nuklearen Krise auf der koreanischen Halbinsel im letzten Jahrzehnt? Ausgehend von der Annahme, dass die öffentliche Diskussion weitgehend von den Eliten geprägt wird, stelle ich die Frage, warum die südkoreanischen Eliten kein großes Interesse an einer Diskussion über die Option zur Entwicklung von Atomwaffen gezeigt haben bzw. dieser ferngeblieben sind. Ich stelle die These auf, dass das Fehlen einer öffentlichen Debatte über Atomwaffen erklärt werden kann, indem man die stabilen und dauerhaften sozialen Normen im Inland betrachtet, die aus den Ideen des "Engagements" und der "Atomkraft für die nationale Entwicklung" entstanden sind.

Abstract

Despite North Korea's nuclearization, not only has Seoul remained restrained in pursuing its own nuclear weapons option, but more interestingly, there has not been any notable public debate on the strategic option of acquiring independent nuclear deterrent. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to identify potential causes of the lack of public debate on nuclear weapons in South Korea. What is the cause of the relative lack of public debate on nuclear weapons option in South Korea, given escalation of nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula for the last decade? Assuming that public debate is largely shaped by the elites, I ask why the South Korean elites have not shown much interest in and stayed away from discussing the option of developing nuclear weapons. I claim that the lack of public debate on nuclear weapons needs to be explained by looking at stable and persistent domestic social norms, which were created from ideas of "engagement" and "atoms for national development".

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1. Introduction

Our knowledge on the causes of nuclear proliferation has greatly advanced by recent scholarly research on states' nuclear weapons choices. While earlier research in the field generally took a relatively simplistic view by focusing on the supply side by asserting that states' nuclear choices were only matter of technical capacity, more recent scholarly works have emphasized demand side of the equation referring to the historical record that only some of the suspects have actually decided to pursue nuclear weapons.¹ The latter, therefore, asks why states forswear nuclear weapons even when they have technical capacity to acquire the bomb. Important variables that have been highlighted by recent literature include economic strategy preferred by governing coalition, top state leaders' "national identity conception," international social environment and nonproliferation norms, institutionalized level of nuclear policy flexibility, and strategic interactions between countries involved.²

South Korea is one of the puzzling cases in this respect. On the one hand, it undoubtedly possesses technical capacity to build indigenous nuclear weapons arsenal. Not only does it boast solid industrial infrastructure and manufacturing base, South Korea has become a major exporter of nuclear power reactors in recent years.³ The U.S. military's Joint Operating Environment has categorized it as one of the "nuclear threshold states" that could "quickly build nuclear devices if they chose to do so."⁴ On the other hand, the security environment surrounding South Korea has rapidly deteriorated in the past decade as it has become evident that North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons.⁵ The North, whose national goal is to unify the two Koreas by any possible means, has successfully established itself as a de-facto nuclear weapons state despite its prolonged economic difficulties. Even in the face of nuclear North Korea, however, Seoul has remained restrained and not pursued nuclear weapons option. But

¹ Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Theories of Nuclear Proliferation: The State of the Field," *The Nonproliferation Review* Vol. 13, No. 3 (2006); Jacques E. C. Hymans, "The Study of Nuclear Proliferation and Nonproliferation: Toward a New Consensus?," in William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (eds.), *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century: The Role of Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

² Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Jacques E. C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2014); Elizabeth N. Saunders, "The Domestic Politics of Nuclear Choices—A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2019).

³ Christian Oliver, "Korea Eyes Wider Nuclear Export," *Financial Times*, January 21, 2010.

⁴ United States Joint Forces Command, "The Joint Operating Environment 2008," November 25, 2008, p. 32; United States Joint Forces Command, "The Joint Operating Environment 2010," February 18, 2010, p. 45.

⁵ Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, "North Korea is a Nuclear State. Get Used to It." *The New York Times*, June 12, 2018.

what is even more interesting in South Korean case is the lack of public debate on acquiring independent nuclear deterrent. Although few right-wing politicians and journalists have recently attempted to publicize the issue of possessing nuclear weapons, or at least capability to build them when need be, they did not gain much attention in the South Korean society. Thus, one prominent conservative journalist lamented that “is it not worthwhile even discussing in public the issue of independent nuclear weapons in South Korea?”⁶

In this paper, I seek to identify potential causes of the lack of public debate on nuclear weapons in South Korea for the past decade. What is the cause of the relative lack of public debate on nuclear weapons option in South Korea, given escalation of nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula for the last decade? Assuming that public debate is largely shaped by the elites, I ask why the South Korean elites and opinion leaders have not shown much interest in and stayed away from discussing the option of developing nuclear weapons, not to mention implementing a policy for obtaining nuclear weapons. It should be noted at the outset that I am not interested in why South Korea has not made turnaround and pursued nuclear weapons on its own in the face of nuclear North Korea. While the question itself merits serious research, the existing theoretical perspectives offer relatively satisfactory answers to that puzzle. My focus in this paper is on the virtual absence of public debate on nuclear weapons option in South Korea in the last decade, which is analytically disparate question. I argue that the lack of public debate on nuclear weapons needs to be explained by looking at stable and persistent domestic social norms, which were created from ideas of “engagement” and “atoms for national development.” In the sections that follow, I show how social norms have restrained elites from talking about nuclear weapons in the public domain.

This paper is organized in the following manner. In the first section, I establish my puzzle by examining the supply side conditions of nuclear proliferation in South Korea and also by making reference to Japan. I show that while both South Korea and Japan are capable of building nuclear weapons on short notice, the public debate on this possible choice is largely absent in the former compared to the latter. In the following section, I discuss factors that might influence the absence of public debate on nuclear weapons in South Korea. Particular attention is given to the provision of nuclear umbrella by the U.S. and the international treaties and agreements that have binding effects on South Korea. The next section introduces variables that better explain the case than the alternative ones, which are domestic social norms generated by the ideas of “engagement” and “atoms for national development.” Then, I conclude with theoretical and practical implications drawn from my analysis of the South Korean case.

⁶ Kim Dae-joong, “Discussing Nuclear Weapons in Public,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 7, 2011.

2. Why South Korea?

After North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Non-proliferation Treaty in 2003, a number of high-ranking U.S. officials and regional experts made a dire forecast about possible nuclear domino in the region. It was Japan that first caught their eyes. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, among others, during a hearing before the House International Relations Committee, contended that “the balance of opinion of those who have looked at the region carefully is that a nuclear capable North Korea could well produce a decision in Japan to seek a nuclear weapons capability.”⁷ South Korea, however, was another source of grave concern. In 2005, for example, Thomas Schieffer, the United States Ambassador to Japan, expressed his concern that the nuclear North Korea might “increase the pressure on both South Korea and Japan to consider going nuclear themselves.”⁸ Kurt Campbell, currently Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, also suggested that the volatile regional security, caused by North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, may compel non-nuclear states such as Japan and South Korea to rethink their nuclear options.⁹ After North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the U.S. Congressional Research Service report expressed fear that Japan would pursue its own nuclear capacity followed by South Korea's nuclearization.¹⁰

What underlies these grave concerns is the fact that both South Korea and Japan possess highly advanced nuclear technology. Not only do they boast solid industrial infrastructure and manufacturing base, but they have developed a large civilian nuclear energy sector to supply much needed electricity. South Korea currently operates 24 reactors nationwide and that makes it one of the “big six” nuclear powers in the world along with the United States and Japan, among others.¹¹ Seoul is also becoming one of the world's leading suppliers of nuclear technology and services as evidenced by the 20-billion-dollar deal it won to build reactors in the United Arab Emirates. On this basis, nuclear experts such as James Clay Moltz have argued that South Korea can build the bomb within two years of time if it chose

⁷ Quoted in Katsuhisa Furukawa, “Nuclear Option, Arms Control, and Extended Deterrence: In Search of a New Framework for Japan's Nuclear Policy,” in Jeffrey W. Thompson and Benjamin Self (eds.), *Japan's Nuclear Option: Security, Politics, and Policy in the 21st Century* (Washington D.C.: Stimson Center, 2004), p. 107.

⁸ Quoted in Frank Barnaby and Shaun Burnie, “Thinking the Unthinkable: Japanese Nuclear Power and Proliferation in East Asia,” *A Joint Report by Oxford Research Group and Citizen's Nuclear Information Center* (2005), p. 11.

⁹ Kurt M. Campbell, “Nuclear Proliferation Beyond Rogues,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2002). Also see Kurt M. Campbell, “Reconsidering a Nuclear Future: Why Countries Might Cross over to the Other Side,” in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn and Mitchell B. Reiss (eds.), *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Sharon Squassoni, “North Korea's Nuclear Test: Motivations, Implications, and U.S. Options,” *CRS Report for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, 2006), p. 9.

¹¹ Eunjung Lim, “South Korea's Nuclear Dilemmas,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2019).

to do so.¹² The U.S. intelligence assessment also approves this view by categorizing it as one of the “nuclear threshold states.” Pundits have also called South Korea as one of the “latent nuclear powers” in the region, along with Japan and Taiwan.¹³

In South Korea, it was not until 2011 that mainstream media bring up the issue of an independent nuclear deterrent. In an op-ed published in *Chosun Ilbo* in January, one of the major conservative newspapers in South Korea, Kim Dae-joong, one of the most influential columnists in the nation, declared that it is time for South Korea to develop its own nuclear arms.¹⁴ The purpose of its independent nuclear weapons was, he argued, “neither offensive nor defensive,” but to “enforce restraint, establish balance between the two Koreas, and ensure negotiations” for dismantling North Korean nuclear arsenal. Even after the publication of this op-ed, Kim’s call for the public debate about nuclear weapons option did not get attention within the elite circle in South Korea. Recognizing the fact that his call did not attract much, if at all, attention, he lamented in another op-ed in the following month that “even raising the possibility of developing independent nuclear arms is considered taboo and is completely ignored in South Korean society.”¹⁵ In fact, he was not the only one who raised the issue in South Korea. Chung Mong-joon, a senior lawmaker and former chairman of the conservative Grand National Party (GNP), was the most prominent advocate of the independent nuclear deterrent. At first, however, he did not support developing South Korean nuclear weapons. In the summer of 2011, Chung called for redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea in order to pressure North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.¹⁶ But later in 2012, he changed his position and urged the comprehensive re-examination of South Korea’s policy toward the North and developing independent nuclear arms to ensure the balance of threat on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁷ But interestingly enough, his plea for independent nuclear deterrent did not win public support nor was it met by severe criticism. While some rebuked Chung’s remark as being irresponsible and naïve, the fact that he brought up the issue simply did not attract much attention from the media and the elites, let alone the public.

¹² James Clay Moltz, “Future Nuclear Proliferation Scenarios in Northeast Asia,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2006), p. 595.

¹³ Mark Fitzpatrick, *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ Kim Dae-joong, “Time for South Korea to Develop Its Own Nuclear Arms,” *Chosun Ilbo*, January 11, 2011.

¹⁵ Kim Dae-joong, “Discussing Nuclear Weapons in Public,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 7, 2011.

¹⁶ Yonhap News, March 30, 2011.

¹⁷ “South Korean Lawmaker Calls for Independent Nuclear-Weapon Capability,” *Global Security Newswire*, June 4, 2012.

Table 1: Public Opinion on Nuclear Armament, 2010–2020

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Support	55.6	62.6	66.0	62.9	61.3	62.3	59.9	64.1	54.8	67.1	69.3
Oppose	44.5	37.4	34.0	37.1	38.7	37.7	40.1	35.9	45.3	32.9	30.7

Source: J. James Kim, et al. "Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies* (September 2021), p. 32.

In a series of survey conducted since the late 1990s, the South Korean public has shown a consistent support for the independent nuclear option should there be a major deterioration in their security environment. During the late 1990s, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed that South Korea should develop nuclear weapons once North Korea acquires nuclear capability.¹⁸ And an annual survey by a think tank from 2010 to 2020 has proved that such support has indeed been steady and significant.¹⁹ From these public opinion surveys, it is safe to conclude that there seems to be no nuclear allergy among the public in South Korea.²⁰ Then we are left with a puzzle: why we have not seen much public debate about the option of independent nuclear weapons in South Korea?

3. Possible explanations

While there is an abundant literature on the causes of nuclear weapons proliferation, the question on the lack of public debate about independent nuclear deterrent in potential nuclear proliferators has not been explored up to this date.²¹ Nonetheless, it is possible to discern some likely arguments with respect to factors that might have contributed to the absence of public debate on nuclear weapons in

¹⁸ Norman Levin, *The Shape of Korea's Future: South Korean Attitudes toward Unification and Long-Term Security Issues* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1999), pp. 22-25.

¹⁹ J. James Kim, et al. "Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies* (September 2021).

²⁰ Of course, there is an issue of whether we can take the results of such opinion polls as evidence of South Korean public's genuine preference. Polls often use ambiguous language and different wording from survey to survey. Moreover, the public may not possess detailed and balanced information about potential consequences of South Korea's nuclear pursuit. On the latter, see Sangyong Son and Jong Hee Park, "Do South Korean Voters Really Want Nuclear Armament?," *Korean Political Science Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2020).

²¹ For the most recent review of the field, see Scott D. Sagan, "The Causes of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 14 (2011).

South Korea. Some of the possible explanations are based on the provision of nuclear umbrella by the U.S. and the international treaties and agreements that are binding on South Korea.

First, it is possible to argue that the lack of public debate stems from the fact that South Korea has been under the protection of its patron, and U.S. nuclear umbrella in particular. The origin of U.S. nuclear umbrella on South Korea goes back to the early Cold War years. Several years after the end of the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration decided to pull back significant number of troops stationed in Korea. In order to compensate this troop withdrawal, the U.S. started to deploy tactical nuclear weapons onto the South Korean soil in 1958, based on the newly adopted "New Look" strategy.²² The American tactical nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea had served as a symbolic cornerstone of U.S. security guarantee to Korea. Although the tactical nuclear weapons were completely removed from South Korean soil in 1991 as part of the Bush administration's effort to drawdown U.S. tactical nuclear weapons around the world, the U.S. has continuously promised to provide extended nuclear deterrence on South Korea. This view therefore would suggest that as long as the U.S. provides credible security assurances in the form of nuclear umbrella against possible attack from the North, South Korea has no incentive to consider the option of independent nuclear weapons.²³ And the reason there is virtually any public debate about nuclear weapons in Korea is because the elites have become so complacent about U.S. security guarantee toward South Korea's defense. The fact that the U.S. has maintained quite a massive amount of military in South Korea further strengthen the argument that Koreans are psychologically dependent on the U.S. in their defense against the northern enemy.

But the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment has not been always constant. During the 1970s, for example, South Korea's confidence in U.S. security assurances was very low due to the escalation of tension with North Korea and the sudden change in the U.S. defense posture toward Asia. Out of frustration and anxiety that the U.S. would withdraw its security commitment to South Korea, South Korean president Park Chung Hee made decision to initiate a secret nuclear weapons program in the early 1970s. It should be highlighted that the U.S. did not pull out the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea despite significant reduction in the number of American combatants stationed in Korea. Although Park publicly declared that he would not pursue independent nuclear weapons capability in 1977 under U.S. pressure, the clandestine nuclear weapons program continued until his assassination in October 1979. The credibility of U.S. security commitment to South Korea was

²² Kang Choi and Joon-Sung Park, "South Korea: Fears of Abandonment and Entrapment," in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 374.

²³ T.V. Paul, *Power and Prudence: Why Nations Forego Nuclear Weapons* (Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), pp. 22-23.

restored soon after his death. Ronald Reagan, newly elected president of the U.S., was much more willing to provide credible security guarantee to its allies including South Korea. He promised no further reduction in American troops in South Korea and also, for the first time, explicitly confirmed U.S. nuclear umbrella over South Korea in a joint communiqué signed in 1982.²⁴

Just as during the 1970s when the U.S. had initiated the withdrawal plan that would reduce number of American troops stationed in Korea, when president Roh Moo Hyun sworn into office in 2003, the Bush administration announced a plan to cut back its forces in Korea as well as to relocate remaining troops back the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to south of Seoul. While the Nixon administration's call for the troop reduction had primarily resulted from the isolationist sentiments among the American public weary of the protracted war in Vietnam, the reduction and relocation of American forces in Korea by the Bush administration decades later was part of its attempts to cope with the costly war in Iraq. As one expert on the region has pointed out, it was fairly conceivable that South Korea could feel uncertain or suspicious of the U.S. security commitment that it would imagine a way to guarantee its security without U.S. nuclear umbrella, possibly through acquiring independent nuclear arms.²⁵ The alliance relations between the two countries were also undergoing strain due primarily to the growing anti-American sentiments among the young generation in Korea. Not only president Roh himself was elected on an anti-American platform, but he was also willing to sacrifice the alliance with the U.S for his engagement policy toward North Korea.²⁶ Nonetheless, there was no public debate about whether to pursue independent nuclear weapons option within South Korean society.

Even Donald Trump's not-so-traditional presidency centered around the idea of "America First" did not bring about big change to the broad picture. While the alliance relationship was in deep trouble throughout his term with his reckless approach towards North Korea and demand for more cost sharing for U.S. troops in South Korea, yet there has not been a dramatic increase in the voices calling for South Korea's nuclear armament.²⁷ In other words, variation in the perception of credibility of U.S.

²⁴ Scott Snyder and Joyce Lee, "Infusing Commitment with Credibility: The Role of Security Assurance in Cementing the U.S.-ROK Alliance," in Jeffrey Knopf (ed.), *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 168.

²⁵ Kurt M. Campbell, "Reconsidering a Nuclear Future: Why Countries Might Cross Over to the Other Side," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn and Mitchell B. Reiss (eds.), *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 22.

²⁶ Hahm Chaibong, "The Two South Koreas: A House Divided," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2005).

²⁷ For the crisis over North Korean nuclear weapons during the first year of his presidency, see Van Jackson, *On The Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

security commitment among South Korean elites does not explain the absence of public debate about nuclear weapons.²⁸

It may also be plausible to argue that the lack of public debate is mainly due to the international treaties and agreements that South Korea has signed onto. On the one hand, South Korea is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as well as International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocols. As a "non-nuclear weapons state (NNWS)" under the NPT, South Korea has pledged not to possess nuclear weapons or fissile materials, and to use nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes. While it was only under U.S. pressure that South Korea joined the treaty in 1975, it has followed all measures with serious commitment to the nonproliferation regime.²⁹ Yet the fact that the South Korean government has demonstrated its commitment to nonproliferation does not help us understand the lack of public debate about independent nuclear deterrent.

There is a general consensus among the scholars of nuclear proliferation that the NPT does not have strong effect on the likelihood of proliferation. Bradley Thayer, for example, has pointed out that the NPT cannot prevent states from acquiring nuclear weapons when they are determined to do so, particularly when they are faced with acute security problems.³⁰ In fact, the Article 5 of the treaty stipulates that signatories have the sovereign right to withdraw from the treaty "if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country."³¹ The only condition attached to this clause is to notify such withdrawal to the United Nations Security Council three months in advance. The regime's survivability, therefore, has been frequently been called into question since its inception.³² Although we are not concerned in this paper with state decision to proliferate per se, the fact that the NPT regime has been continuously challenged has some implications as to why it does not explain the lack of public debate. Since the NPT regime has not been effective, or at least has been perceived as largely impotent, it is difficult to argue that the lack of public debate is attributable to the presence of regime. And even if the NPT had strong

²⁸ A recent study claims that high credibility may increase support for an independent nuclear capability as people fear their security provider's miscalculation. Lauren Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 64, No. 6 (2020).

²⁹ It took 7 years for South Korean National Assembly to ratify the NPT. From the beginning South Korea did not want to sign the NPT, referring to its concern with the potential use of nuclear weapons by China and possible transfer of nuclear materials to North Korea. And Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly threatened president Park with possible cutting off of economic ties to ratify and implement the treaty. Choi and Park, "South Korea: Fears of Abandonment and Entrapment," p. 399. Also see Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, p. 91.

³⁰ Bradley A. Thayer, "The Causes of Nuclear Proliferation and the Utility of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1995).

³¹ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, April 22, 1970.

³² For the contrasting view, see Sagan, "The Causes of Nuclear Proliferation".

binding effects on state decision with regards to nuclear weapons, it cannot dictate what can be said and what cannot be said in the public sphere.

On the other hand, South Korea has also agreed not to “test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons” and also not to possess “nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities” in a joint declaration with North Korea on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.³³ As president Bush announced that the U.S. would unilaterally withdraw all land-and-sea based tactical nuclear weapons that had been deployed outside of the U.S. in September 1991, South Korean president Roh Tae Woo responded by approaching its archrival North Korea. President Roh first unilaterally declared that South Korea would not build, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons or seek enrichment or reprocessing capability. Following the complete withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from South Korean soil, the North agreed to match president Roh’s unilateral declaration by signing a joint declaration on denuclearization. Ever since the agreement was signed by the two Koreas, successive South Korean administrations have pledged to keep its commitment to peaceful use of nuclear energy under the joint declaration. In 2005, South Korea again made it clear that “The 1992 joint declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula should be observed and implemented” in a joint statement, which was the result of multiple of rounds of negotiation among the six parties concerned with North Korean nuclear issue.³⁴ Even after North Korea’s nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, South Korea has reassured the international community that the joint declaration still has binding effects.

While the South Korean government has continuously reaffirmed its sincere commitment to the joint declaration and to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, there has been a growing voice within South Korean society that the 1992 joint declaration has already been nullified by North Korean nuclear weapons programs and actual tests. In fact, the only prohibition of the joint declaration that North Korea has not violated is the ban on the use of nuclear weapons. North Korea has thoroughly violated every other principle of joint declaration including prohibitions on the reprocessing and enrichment facilities. What is also noteworthy is the emergence of “peaceful nuclear sovereignty” argument within South Korean society. Under the Korea-U.S. Atomic Energy Agreement signed in 1972, South Korea has virtually been denied any rights for reprocessing or alteration of nuclear materials without the consent

³³ Joint declaration of South and North Korea on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, February 19, 1992 (https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/korea_denuclearization.pdf).

³⁴ The Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks, September 19, 2005 (http://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/publications/September_19_2005_Joint_Statement.doc/file_view).

from Washington.³⁵ Those who argue for the peaceful nuclear sovereignty have recently gained much support within the elite circle in Korea. Their argument is mostly based on potential economic benefits of establishing a full nuclear cycle.³⁶ First, South Korea desperately needs the reprocessing facility to manage the rapidly increasing stockpile of nuclear waste. Second, Seoul also needs to complete the cycle in order to be more competitive in the burgeoning global nuclear power plant market. Lastly, reprocessing capability is needed because it would provide a long-term solution to South Korea's growing energy demands through recycling of uranium. Nuclear scientists, conservative journalists, and energy industry are primary supporters of the peaceful nuclear sovereignty. They assert that South Korea should be able to enjoy the rights to possess reprocessing and enrichment facilities as Japan does. The South Korean government, in fact, pushed hard in such direction when it negotiated for the revision of the agreement with the U.S., yet it failed to achieve the right to enrich uranium or reprocess spent nuclear fuel.³⁷ From this point of view, therefore, it is difficult to make a case that the public debate has been deterred by South Korea's commitment to the agreements that it made with North Korea.

4. Domestic social norms

Then, what would explain the lack of public debate about nuclear weapons option in South Korea? I argue in this section that domestic social norms help us explain the reason why we have not seen much public debate about independent nuclear weapons option in South Korea. Constructivist scholars of international politics have emphasized that human behavior is guided not only by material cost-benefit calculations, but more importantly by socially shared and transmitted ideas, beliefs, and norms. While ideas and beliefs affect the outcome mainly by serving as road maps and focal points, norms make claims not only on cognitive level but also on actual behaviors.³⁸ Norms can not only shape human behaviors but they are also able to inform individual preferences and interests.³⁹ In various ways, norms can influence human behaviors both directly and indirectly. Peter Katzenstein makes distinction

³⁵ Article 8 (c) and (d) of the Amendment to Agreement for Cooperation between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Korea Concerning Civil Uses of Atomic Energy, May 15, 1974.

³⁶ Seongho Sheen, "Nuclear Sovereignty versus Nuclear Security: Renewing the ROK-U.S. Atomic Energy Agreement," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011), pp. 276-278.

³⁷ Choe Sang-Hun, "U.S. and South Korea Reach Revised Nuclear Deal," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2015.

³⁸ For the role of ideas, see Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, "Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework," in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). For social norms, Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan* (Ithaca, NY: 1996, Cornell University Press), pp. 18-22.

³⁹ Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro, "Norms, Identity, and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise," in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

between different kinds of norms.⁴⁰ Among them, regulatory norms and constitutive norms are of particular importance. Regulatory norms define the standards of behavior—what is appropriate and what is not. Constitutive norms define collective identities that inform interests and thus also shape behaviors. In other words, behaviors are informed and defined by both regulatory and constitutive norms. I argue that what is appropriate to be said and debated in public domain is determined by social norms composed of both regulatory and constitutive norms.

I do not assume that South Korean elites share and thus informed by common social norms with regards to nuclear weapons. In fact, it is not realistic to see a society as coherent and homogenous and elites subscribing to common social norms. South Korea today is a deeply divided country along the political and ideological lines. Clashes between the conservatives and progressives over important issues such as the direction of national economy and policy toward North Korea have created a deep political fissure.⁴¹ This ideological division became to be prominent in 2002 with the election of Roh Moo Hyun as president of Korea. Even after democratization in 1987, political power in South Korea had remained in the hands of conservatives who, despite democratization, did manage to hold onto power. But with the election of longtime opposition leader Kim Dae-jung in 1997 and, more prominently, Roh as a succeeding president, the progressives have gained unprecedented strength in South Korean political scene. Progressives had become to have more or less equal voice within South Korean society as a result of president Roh's enthusiastic challenge against the predominant conservative force.

While the demarcation line between the conservatives and progressives is partly defined by their respective emphases on economic growth and redistribution of wealth, the two camps are more importantly defined by their positions toward North Korea and the U.S.⁴² Conservatives in South Korea are defined by its adversarial relationship with the North and its security alliance with U.S. in ensuring its security. They see the security of South Korea predicated on vigilance against the ever-present North Korea threat through cultivating close alliance partnership with the U.S. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to see the North as a lost brethren with which the South should reconcile and the U.S. as sometimes a disruptive interloper. Although this is a rather crude caricature of the Korean society, it reflects a genuine ideological division that has largely defined Korean politics as well as society in the past decade. In the following discussion, I argue that the conservatives and progressives in South Korea have been informed by different social norms with respect to their behavior toward

⁴⁰ Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security*, pp. 18-19.

⁴¹ Hahm, "The Two South Koreas".

⁴² Haesook Chae and Steven Kim, "Conservatives and Progressives in South Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2008).

nuclear weapons. While the conservatives have subscribed to the idea that atoms should be used for national economic development and social norms created by that idea, the progressives have been influenced by social norms created by the idea of engagement with North Korea. Both of these social norms have restrained elites from both camps from raising the issue of independent nuclear weapons in public domain in South Korea. I now turn to discuss these two in more detail.

5. "Engagement" as social norm

Constructivist scholars have paid close attention to the empirical cases where social norms determine the policy outcome through shaping preferences of actors involved. But there are also circumstances where policy change creates social norms that in turn shape interests and behaviors. The engagement policy implemented by two consecutive progressive administrations from 1998 to 2007 is a good example of the latter. As soon as assuming the office in 1998, president Kim Dae-jung announced in his inaugural address that he would make reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas a top priority of his government, despite the Asian financial crisis that had just hit South Korea and Kim Jong Il's continuing bellicosity.⁴³ He metaphorically called this engagement strategy as the "sunshine" policy as in the famous Aesop fable.⁴⁴ Severely criticizing past South Korean administrations for being inconsistent and insincere in dealing with the North, president Kim stressed that he would pursue consistent and sincere engagement policy no matter what temporary hurdles might arise. As a first step, Seoul abandoned the word "unification" from all descriptions of government policies toward the North and instead substituting terms such as constructive engagement policy in order to avoid unnecessarily provoking Pyongyang's fear of being absorbed by its stronger neighbor in south. The policy's fundamental objective, therefore, was not unification by absorption as previous administrations' policy goal had been, but establishing peaceful coexistence and cooperation on the Korean peninsula.⁴⁵

While the Kim administration made it clear that it would not tolerate any military threat or armed provocation by Pyongyang, the emphasis was on breaking the vicious cycle of hostile actions and reactions through building peace between the two Koreas. According to Moon Chung-in, who served as a senior advisor to president Kim, the sunshine policy was predicated on a number of central ideas

⁴³ Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea: South Korean Debates over Policies Towards North Korea* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), pp. 23-24.

⁴⁴ For an insider's take on the intellectual origins of the sunshine policy, see Chung-in Moon, *The Sunshine Policy: In Defense of Engagement as a Path to Peace* (Seoul, South Korea: Yonsei University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ Hong Soon-young, "Thawing Korea's Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 78:3 (1999), p. 10.

that would achieve peace.⁴⁶ Among them, absolute abandonment of any war or military conflicts on the Korean peninsula was one the most fundamental ideas that undergird the sunshine policy. President Kim throughout his tenure argued that war between the two Koreas cannot be justified and should be avoided at any cost. He also repeatedly called for the removal of nuclear weapons as well as bio and chemical weapons. This was the principle he had upheld for a long time even before being elected as president. The sunshine policy embodied the three principles of peace he had championed as an opposition leader: coexistence, peaceful exchange, and peaceful unification.

This engagement policy was succeeded by president Roh Moo Hyun who sworn into office amid the escalation of tension between Pyongyang and Washington over clandestine enriched uranium program. His inauguration was even overshadowed by North Korea's belligerence as it test-fired a short-range missile over the sea between South Korea and Japan.⁴⁷ From the outset, however, the Roh administration clearly stayed away from all-options-are-on-the-table style of coercive strategy toward Pyongyang. He was more disturbed by the Bush administration's hawkish policy toward the North rather than the latter's pursuit of nuclear weapons. President Roh therefore initiated the "policy of peace and prosperity," which was an updated version of the sunshine policy of his predecessor.⁴⁸ By proposing the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, the Roh administration sought, on the one hand, to establish "a virtuous circle of peace and prosperity by fostering exchanges and cooperation among countries in the region," and on the other hand, to overcome military confrontation between the two Koreas and to construct a "lasting peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as a precondition to peace and common prosperity in Northeast Asia."⁴⁹ Even after North Korea tested its first ever nuclear device in October 2006, Roh maintained his optimistic outlook arguing that the situation could be managed with "cool-headedness": "It is true that a nuclear test, in particular, has escalated the level of security threat. I nonetheless believe that it is of utmost importance not to exaggerate the security threat. We need to scrutinize calmly and carefully different issues involved... Our goal is to achieve peace and we are committed to maintaining it."⁵⁰

The decade of implementation of the engagement policy has had huge impact on both the public and elites in South Korea. In fact, the dramatic shift from confrontational policy toward the North to the

⁴⁶ Moon, *The Sunshine Policy*, pp. 21-25.

⁴⁷ Aidan Foster-Carter, "North Korea-South Korea Relations: A Bumpy Road Ahead?," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2003).

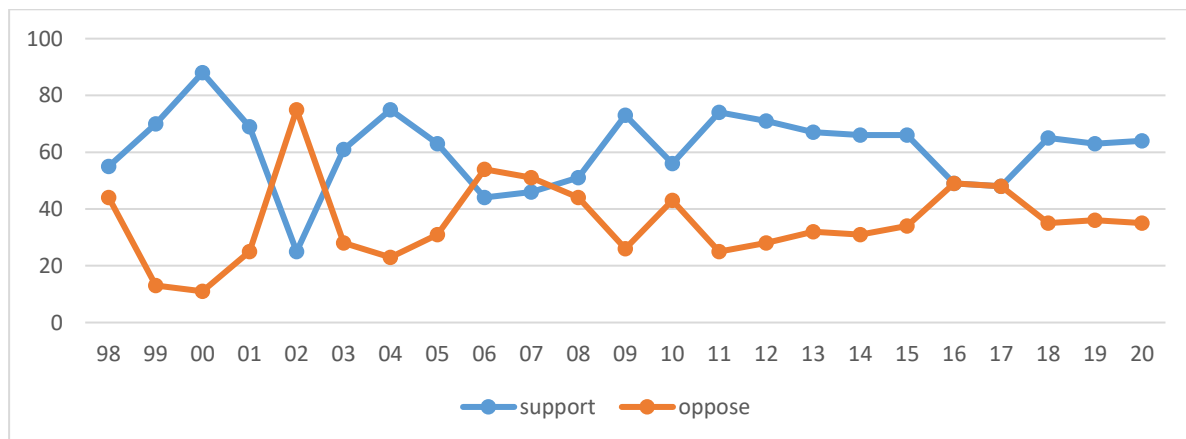
⁴⁸ Address at the Inaugural Ceremony, February 25, 2003. Office of the President, *Speeches of President Roh Moo Hyun*, Vol. 1 (Seoul: Office of the President, 2004), p. 28.

⁴⁹ Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, *Toward a Peaceful and Prosperous Northeast Asia* (Seoul, South Korea: Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, 2004).

⁵⁰ Concluding Remarks at a Foreign Investment Promotion Session, November 1, 2006 (<https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp>).

engagement policy has drawn heavy criticisms from the conservative elites mainly through major conservative newspapers such as Chosun Ilbo, Joogang Ilbo, and Donga Ilbo. From the outset of its implementation, South Korean public and elites were deeply divided over the goals as well as its costs and perceived effectiveness of the engagement policy. Critics have continuously attempted to challenge and undermine the engagement policy during the decade under progressive governments. Nonetheless, the ten-year of engagement policy has resulted in transformation in how South Koreans view their northern neighbor and also how they define South Korean national identity. In fact, it was more than just a shift in Seoul's policy toward its Northern neighbor. The implementation of sunshine policy, in particular during the Kim administration, transformed the traditional boundaries within South Korea's domestic politics and created new constituents who came to have vested interests in the continuation and strengthening of engagement policy toward North Korea.⁵¹ With some tangible progresses culminated by two submits respectively under Kim and Roh, South Korean public perception of the North has drastically changed during these ten years. Coupled with its growing confidence in economy and international political influence, South Korea has become to perceive the North as "less of a threat and more of a compatriot."⁵² In other words, North Korea has become a younger brother who is in desperate need of help, not a competitor or enemy. North Korea is no longer depicted as the "main enemy" in the official military documents including the Defense White Paper.⁵³

Figure 1. South Korean Public Opinion about Engagement with North Korea, 1998–2020



Source: The surveys from 1998 to 2009 are from Jong Kun Choi, "Sunshine Over a Barren Soil: The Domestic Politics of Engagement Identity Formation in South Korea," *Asian Perspective* 34:4 (2010), p. 134; For the surveys from 2010 to 2020, see Annual Public Opinion Surveys from the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

⁵¹ Heon Joo Jung, "Kim Dae-jung as a Heresthetician: How Did He Transform South Korean Politics with Inter-Korean Dialogue?," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2015).

⁵² Gi-Wook Shin and Hilary Jan Izatt, "Anti-American and Anti-Alliance Sentiments in South Korea," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (2011), p. 1122.

⁵³ After a fierce public debate, the phrase "main enemy" that had characterized North Korea for decades was dropped from the Defense White Paper in 2005. Heon Joo Jung, "The Rise and Fall of Anti-American Sentiment in South Korea: Deconstructing Hegemonic Ideas and Threat Perception," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 5 (2010), pp. 954-958.

Figure 1 shows the change in public opinion from 1998 to 2020 regarding South Korean public's preferences toward engagement with the North. At the beginning of the engagement policy in 1998, South Korean public opinion was evenly split between those who support the policy and those who oppose it. The summit between the leaders of the two Koreas in June 2000 generated unprecedented support for the reconciliation under engagement policy as the support soared to an astonishing 88%. Of course, the public support for the engagement with Pyongyang has not been consistent. For example, the public support for the engagement fell down to 25% in 2002 after the naval clash between the two Koreas in the West Sea in 2002, which claimed numerous casualties in South Korea. North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 was also a crucial test for the durability of public support for the engagement. While the public opinion against the government's policy toward Pyongyang fell down significantly after the nuclear test in 2006, the support for engagement gained the momentum soon after the crisis. The support for engagement policy went down below 50% percent in 2016 and 2017 during which North Korea tested its nuclear devices multiple times. Again, however, it turned out to be a temporary aberration in the long and persistent trend of favoring engagement over other more assertive policies. In sum, although there has been ebb and flow in public support for engagement policy toward the North depending on the change in security landscape, it has been largely stable and consistent throughout more than past two decades.

The policy change initiated by progressive presidents over a decade has dramatically changed the way in which the public perceives the North and that, in turn, created social norms that define what can be said and cannot be said in public with regards to important security issues such as developing independent nuclear deterrent. The social norm of war aversion, which renounces war as a means of resolving North Korean problems, is now widely accepted as an inviolable principle among both progressive and conservative elites. As Jong Kun Choi puts it, therefore, "virtually no one is promoting the idea of military means to counter Pyongyang's delinquent behavior" in South Korea's public domain today.⁵⁴ The fact that more than 60 percent of public has supported engagement policy during the past decade, except a brief aberration, showcases how powerful it has become as a social norm in South Korea today. Given the increasing political polarization in South Korean society in recent past, it certainly is a remarkable phenomenon.

While the conservative governments that succeeded the ten years of progressive era adopted more hawkish stance towards the North, they never rejected the idea of engagement all together. During the presidential election in 2012, for example, the conservative candidate Park Geun-hye proactively

⁵⁴ Jong Kun Choi, "Sunshine Over a Barren Soil: The Domestic Politics of Engagement Identity Formation in South Korea," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2010), p. 136.

embraced the idea of engagement, not to mention the progressive candidate Moon Jae-in.⁵⁵ Even the Lee Myung-bak government, despite its assertive rhetoric and gestures, promoted the idea of “mutual benefits and common prosperity.”⁵⁶ In other words, the engagement policy has essentially become a default choice for any South Korean governments regardless of their political orientations. The social norm based on the idea that the engagement policy is the best means to deal with North Korea helps us explain the lack of public discussion about nuclear weapons in South Korea. In particular, the progressive elites and media have stayed away from discussing nuclear weapons in public because their aversion against any measures that would escalate tension on the Korean Peninsula. Among those measures, the idea of developing nuclear weapons to counter nuclear weapons was the most direct action that would fundamentally change the whole picture that was considered undesirable even to put on the table.

6. “Atoms for national development” as social norms

South Korea's nuclear history began in the mid-1950s with the help of the U.S. Following the spirit of President Dwight Eisenhower's “Atom for Peace” speech, the U.S. was promoting the transfer of civilian nuclear technology, know-how, equipment, and materials to its allies and developing countries including South Korea. In 1956, Seoul signed an agreement with Washington over civilian use of atomic energy. In this initial phase of its nuclear history, however, South Korea did not have concrete plan to develop nuclear energy program. It was only in early 1960s, with the advent of Park Chung Hee, when Korea started to seriously consider atomic energy as one of the potential alternative energy sources. Park was dedicated to Korea's national economic development partly to secure the country's survival but also to enhance political legitimacy of his military dictatorship. Right after assuming the power, Park set up the Economic Planning Board that would oversee national economic development plans and also developed a series of Five-year Economic Development Plan for Korean economy's modernization and industrialization. At the forefront of his economic development strategies were scientific and technological advances. As Park was seeking to achieve “national reconstruction through science and technology,” they were given an increasingly prominent role in the state-led national development plans.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Park Geun-hye, “A New Kind of Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (2011).

⁵⁶ For a critical take, see Chung-in Moon, “Between Principle and Pragmatism: What Went Wrong with the Lee Myung-bak Government's North Korean Policy?,” *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2011).

⁵⁷ John DiMoia, “Atoms for Sale? Cold War Institution-Building and the South Korean Atomic Energy Project, 1945-1965,” *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2010), pp. 614-616.

Nuclear power was particularly seen as a perfect example of science and technology that would make significant contribution to national economic development. Nuclear energy would compensate for Korea's heavy dependence on imported oil due to the growing demand for stable supply of energy. Thus, Park pushed ahead with the introduction of commercial nuclear reactor without hesitation. Construction of Kori-1, the first nuclear power plant in Korea, began in 1971.⁵⁸ Early plants were built on a turn-key basis on which American firm Westinghouse provided completed nuclear power plants in South Korea. But as early as the late 1960s, the Park government devised a long-term plan to achieve "technological self-reliance" in the development and use of nuclear energy.⁵⁹ When it conducted the feasibility study for the Kori-1, its first nuclear power plant, Seoul was also planning to construct a nuclear reprocessing facility by the end of 1970s.⁶⁰ These programs were directed by the Council for the Promotion of Nuclear Power Generation (CPNPG), headed by the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Planning. Park, being suspicious of external powers, sought to achieve economic as well as military self-reliance through industrialization and modernization of Korea's economy.⁶¹

The idea of "atoms for national development" persisted after Park's reign and the demise of developmental state in South Korea. As Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim point out, "a larger segment of the South Korean public, and even many opposition politicians and dissident intellectuals, shared the vision of development nationalism espoused by the military regimes" even long after South Korea's democratization.⁶² "Atoms for national development" has most prominently been espoused by conservative president Lee Myung-bak who was elected in 2007 on the basis of his credentials as a former executive of Hyundai Construction company, one of the chaebols in South Korea. As soon as he assumed office, he announced a new strategy for national development based on "low carbon and green growth."⁶³ The backdrop against which he initiated this new strategy was a persistent problem Korea has been facing: heavy dependence on foreign oil imports for energy needs of energy-intensive industries. President Lee concluded that nuclear energy was "one of the most efficient power

⁵⁸ Korean Atomic Energy Research Institute, *50 Years of Nuclear Power* (Seoul, South Korea: KAERI, 2008), p. 91 [in Korean].

⁵⁹ Atomic Energy Commission, *Long-Term Plan of Research, Development, and Use of Nuclear Energy* (Seoul: South Korea, AEC, 1968) quoted in Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, "Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea," *Minerva* 47 (2009), p. 134.

⁶⁰ Korean Nuclear Society, *History of Nuclear Energy in Korea* (Daejeon, South Korea: Korean Nuclear Society, 2010) [in Korean].

⁶¹ In addition to his security policy for military self-reliance, Park decided to develop Korea's independent nuclear deterrent in early 1970s due primarily to his concern about U.S. troops withdrawal from Korea. The weapons program was continued until his death in 1979. See Seung-Young Kim, "Security, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles: The South Korean Case, 1970–82," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2001); in Sung Gul Hong, "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option," in Byung-kook Kim and Ezra Vogel (eds.), *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁶² Jasanoff and Kim, "Containing the Atom," p. 134.

⁶³ Address by President Lee Myung-bak on the 63rd anniversary of national liberation and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea, August 15, 2008 (<https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp>).

generation methods that will lead us to a low-carbon society.”⁶⁴ While the initiative was hailed as a viable growth model for the future, what he also had in mind was the possibility of establishing nuclear energy sector as a key export industry that would help lift Korea's economy just as auto and electronics industries had done so in the past. South Korea under President Lee in fact has become one of the world's leading suppliers of nuclear technology in the growing global nuclear energy market. As a report to the U.S. Congress puts it, “South Korea has completed the transition from passive purchaser of turn-key nuclear plants in the 1970s to major nuclear technology supplier, capable of competing with the largest and most experienced nuclear technology companies in the world.”⁶⁵

Even after the Fukushima disaster in Japan, South Korean society remains relatively insensitive to the risks that may be accompanied by expansion of nuclear power industry. Unlike Germany who decided to permanently shut down all of its nuclear reactors in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, South Korea even expanded its nuclear energy program through investment for building more nuclear reactors.⁶⁶ It was only after President Moon Jae-in was elected in 2017 that South Korea announced a gradual phase-out of its nuclear power plants over a period of around 40 years.⁶⁷ Ironically, however, the Moon administration increased its emphasis on expanding exports of the country's nuclear technology.⁶⁸ In fact, Moon himself has actively promoted nuclear exports, at times using his summit meetings to present bid for Korean nuclear firms. Such seemingly opposed political signals have raised questions about the viability of the nuclear phase-out policy, along with economic and social costs of a nuclear drawdown. This proves the fact that South Korean elites—more prominently among conservatives but not restricted to them—are significantly affected by social norms generated by the notion that nuclear energy is key constitutive elements of national development strategy. “Atoms for national development,” the predominant idea during the developmental era, has created durable social norms that have prohibited public discussion of independent nuclear weapons option in South Korean society.

⁶⁴ Lee Myung-bak, “Shifting Paradigms: The Road to Global Green Growth,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2010).

⁶⁵ Mark Holt, “U.S. and South Korean Cooperation in the World Nuclear Energy Market: Major Policy Considerations,” *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, January 21, 2010, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Il Hyun Cho, “To Escape or Embrace Reactors? The Politics of Nuclear Phase-Out in Germany and South Korea,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2022).

⁶⁷ Moon said that South Korea would “abandon the development policy centered on nuclear power plants and exit the era of nuclear energy.” Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at a Ceremony Marking the Permanent Closure of the Kori No. 1 Nuclear Reactor, June 19, 2017 (<https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp>).

⁶⁸ Lindsay Rand and Jonas Siegel, “Nuclear Energy's Staying Power in South Korea,” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2020).

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to explain the lack of public debate on independent nuclear weapons option in South Korea through social constructivist lens. As has already been noted above, however, it is difficult to unearth the causes of the lack of public debate on independent nuclear deterrent simply because there is no tangible evidence as to why people do not talk about it. It is not limited to the issue of nuclear weapons. After all, how would one know for sure what other's intention is unless the latter tells about that? For this reason, I am modest about the explanatory power of domestic social norms I have relied on in my analysis. I do not argue that they alone can explain the phenomenon. Other factors such as security alliance with the U.S. and international treaties and agreements may also contribute to the lack of public debate. But my point is that without taking into account the domestic social norms derived from ideas of "engagement" and "atoms for national development," we cannot fully understand the puzzling lack of public debate about nuclear weapons in South Korea. Also, my analysis does not tell us why domestic social norms have affected debate on nuclear weapons, but have not restrained other debates related to security issues. In fact, South Korean elites and public have not shied away from talking about other security issues in public domain. While a tentative answer can be drawn from the qualitatively different nature of nuclear weapons, further research is needed to fully develop an answer to this question.

Most of the proliferation literature on the demand side of proliferation has so far focused on either decision to pursue (or not to pursue) nuclear weapons or success in achieving nuclear weapons. One of the theoretical contributions of this paper is that it sheds light on a case where even public debate has not taken place despite the domestic institutional environment that values freedom of speech. The future study of nuclear proliferation may be enriched by extending its focus to deeper causes of nonproliferation. My analysis also has practical implications. As mentioned earlier, the process leading up to the revision of the nuclear agreement between South Korea and the U.S. has revealed the latter's lingering suspicion about the former. Yet, the U.S. should take into consideration the fact that South Korea today is bound by strong and durable domestic social norms that would not allow even discussion of independent nuclear weapon from taking place. It is domestic social norms that have binding effects on South Koreans with regards to nuclear weapons, not the nuclear umbrella or international regimes.