One Bed, Two Dreams: Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence in Korea

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An old Korean expression, *dong sang yi mong*, means "one bed, two dreams." It captures the nuclear dilemma on the Korean Peninsula. Washington seeks to preserve nonproliferation while protecting South Korea through extended deterrence. Seoul wants security without acquiring nuclear weapons. Pyongyang, meanwhile, has built an arsenal intended to protect its regime and strengthen its political leverage.

The central question is no longer whether the United States possesses enough destructive power. It is whether American forces offer credible, flexible responses to nuclear coercion while giving South Koreans the confidence that their ally will act when necessary.

The Nonproliferation Gap

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has limited the spread of nuclear weapons and enabled peaceful nuclear cooperation. Its history reflects a major international achievement. Yet the treaty did not prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear-armed state. Pyongyang joined the NPT in 1985, announced withdrawal in 2003, and conducted its first nuclear test in 2006.

Unlike India and Pakistan, which never joined the treaty, North Korea entered the system before abandoning it. This sequence reveals a dangerous weakness in international safeguards and enforcement. The NPT remains valuable, but its credibility in Northeast Asia depends partly on whether non-nuclear allies can remain secure.

North Korea's 2022 nuclear law explicitly permits nuclear use in circumstances extending beyond retaliation for a nuclear strike. Its provisions include threats to leadership and command systems, as well as certain conventional wartime situations. Such language does not prove an intention to initiate war, but it raises the risk of nuclear threats being used to constrain allied operations or demand concessions.

Consultation Is Different From Assurance

The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), established under the 2023 Washington Declaration, is a meaningful advance. The NCG framework supports bilateral consultation, planning, exercises, and conventional-nuclear integration. These efforts strengthen deterrence and should continue.

However, operational planning is necessarily classified. The South Korean public cannot readily judge how consultation would translate into action during a crisis. That gap does not make the NCG ineffective, but it limits its value as a visible source of reassurance. Deterrence must persuade Pyongyang that aggression will fail while convincing Seoul that American commitments remain dependable.

If public confidence declines, support for an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal may grow. The answer is not to disclose sensitive plans. It is to combine effective consultation with visible capabilities and sustained political commitment.

Modernize the American Nuclear Foundation

Extended deterrence ultimately rests on capable, survivable, and ready nuclear forces. The Minuteman III missile, B-52 bomber, and Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines remain important, but their age creates mounting replacement pressures. Existing systems have been upgraded. Age alone does not mean they are ineffective.

The Sentinel intercontinental missile, B-21 bomber, and Columbia-class submarine are essential nuclear modernization programs. Yet cost growth, schedule risk, and industrial constraints threaten timely replacement. Nuclear command, control, and communications also require sustained investment. Modernization must be treated as a long-term national priority rather than a collection of separate procurement projects.

America now faces Russian nuclear forces, an expanding Chinese arsenal, and North Korean nuclear threats. A 2026 Congressional Research Service assessment describes the challenge of deterring multiple nuclear adversaries and the possibility that existing modernization plans may require adjustment. For Seoul and Tokyo, delays could become questions about future American credibility, not merely American budgeting.

Consider Ground-Based Theater Options

The United States also should examine the case for a modern, ground-launched, nuclear-armed theater missile. The Cold War-era Pershing II disappeared under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and no direct American nuclear-armed ground-launched successor has been fielded. This is a capability question, not an argument for automatically returning nuclear weapons to Korean soil.

Air-delivered weapons, strategic bombers, and submarine-launched missiles already provide formidable options. However, they differ from ground-based theater missiles in deployment, response characteristics, signaling, and political implications. Conventional systems such as the Army's Dark Eagle do not close this nuclear gap.

Any proposal must weigh military utility against escalation danger, arms-control implications, host-nation consent, cost, and the possibility of making fixed bases attractive targets. A new missile would not necessarily improve stability. The alliance should assess the requirement rigorously before choosing a system or deployment location.

Make Assurance Visible

Visible strategic presence offers a separate and more immediate tool. Regular bomber deployments, combined exercises, and carefully planned visits by nuclear-capable platforms can

demonstrate readiness without permanent nuclear basing in South Korea. Furthermore, nuclear-capable aircraft need not carry nuclear weapons during such demonstrations. These activities cannot replace operational planning or credible forces. Nor should symbolism drive reckless escalation. Instead, predictable, coordinated demonstrations can help translate classified commitments into something citizens and adversaries can observe. Washington should develop this approach with Seoul and Tokyo, while clearly distinguishing assurance from provocation.

One Alliance, One Purpose

Three priorities follow: accelerate modernization of the strategic triad and its command systems; study whether ground-based theater nuclear options would strengthen deterrence; and make American strategic commitment more visible through disciplined deployments and exercises. The NCG should connect these efforts through sustained allied consultation.

South Korea should not have to choose between nonproliferation and national survival. Preventing another nuclear-armed state from emerging requires making extended deterrence credible in both military and political terms. The purpose is not to fight a nuclear war, but to prevent one and to ensure that nuclear coercion does not become a successful instrument of policy.

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