**Washington declaration**

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On 26 April, the President of South Korea, Yoon Suk-Yeol, had an important meeting with US President Joe Biden in Washington. This was a significant part of the first state visit made by a South Korean president to the United States since Lee Myung-bak’s visit in 2011. With the increasing nuclear threats from North Korea, Yoon and Biden reconfirmed their commitment to enhancing the South Korea-U.S. alliance, which is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year. Both the leaders adopted a new joint statement called the “Washington Declaration.”

The purpose of this agreement called the “Washington Declaration,” is to protect the Korean Peninsula from a nuclear attack by North Korea. The United States will deploy strategic assets around the Korean Peninsula, and a joint Nuclear Consultative Group will be formed to share tactical information, conduct joint training, and coordinate military responses in the event of any potentially hostile actions by North Korea. While the decision to carry out a nuclear response in such a scenario will remain solely with Washington, the Biden administration will contribute to symbolic deterrence against North Korea by sending nuclear-armed submarines to the region for the first time in 40 years. These submarines are unlikely to be permanently deployed. Tactical nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea were removed from the region in 1991. President Biden emphasized Washington’s strategic support for Seoul by stating that “a nuclear attack by North Korea against the U.S., its allies, or partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of whatever regime were to take such an action.” This language is like that used by former President Donald Trump in a similar context.

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President Yoon Suk Yeol said that South Korea’s new nuclear deterrence agreement with the United States should be understood as an “upgraded” version of the allies’ 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty. Historically, The Allies’ 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty, also known as the Manila Pact, was a collective defence agreement signed on August 30, 1951, between the United States, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. The treaty was designed to promote regional stability and prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Under the terms of the treaty, each member agreed to come to the defence of any other member that was attacked by an external party. The treaty was signed in the context of the Korean War and the perceived threat of Soviet expansion in the region.

The backdrop for this vote of nuclear confidence by the U.S. for its treaty ally is the steady growth of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal, notwithstanding the short-lived hopes for a détente between Mr. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un after their summit meeting in Singapore in 2018. While during the early years after the North first tested a nuclear bomb in 2006 there was less concern over Pyongyang launching a coordinated attack on South Korea or beyond, in recent years, including during the Trump and Biden administrations, North Korea has steadily added to its stock of ICBMs capable of reaching U.S. cities, most recently testing a solid-fuel ICBM and altering its nuclear doctrine to include the option to carry out pre-emptive strikes.

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In January 2021, North Korea held a major meeting of the ruling Workers’ Party in which Kim Jong-un set forth a plan to add new types of capabilities to the country’s nuclear arsenal. The next year saw a worsening spiral of tension on the peninsula. North Korea started testing more missiles, Seoul and Washington restarted large-scale military exercises that were previously halted to incentivize diplomacy, and Pyongyang responded with even more missile activity. In January 2023, South Korea’s President Yoon Suk-Yeol said continued North Korean provocations could prompt Seoul to acquire nuclear weapons or push the U.S. to strengthen its extended deterrence commitment. Seoul, then opted for Washington extended deterrence or the Washington nuclear umbrella in the form of the Washington Declaration. While the “iron-clad” treaty between the U.S. and South Korea will strengthen the nuclear umbrella extended by Washington across the Korean Peninsula, the White House would be loath to risk any skirmish that could endanger U.S. citizens.

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South Korea’s interest in developing its own nuclear weapons, with some politicians suggesting that it could be necessary for the country’s defence against North Korea. However, the recent Washington Declaration has put a spotlight on South Korea’s commitment to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which some critics argue is intended to prevent the country from pursuing nuclear weapons. This has sparked criticism from conservative voices who claim that the declaration is infringing on South Korea’s autonomy and that the country must have the ability to defend itself against North Korea’s nuclear threat. It’s important to note that there has been no official request from the South Korean government to pursue nuclear weapons.

China and Russia have voiced their unease regarding the recently signed “Washington Declaration” between the US and South Korea. China has expressed its disapproval of South Korea over the use of the phrase “need for peace and stability” in reference to the waters around Taiwan, causing tension between the two countries. In response, Liu Jinsong, director general of the Chinese foreign ministry’s Asian affairs department, met with South Korean Embassy minister Kang Sang-wook in Beijing to stress China’s stance on Taiwan and urge South Korea to adhere to the One-China principle. Both the US and South Korean presidents emphasized the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait and rejected any unilateral efforts to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific, including unlawful maritime claims, the militarization of reclaimed features, and coercive activities, as stated in the joint Washington declaration.

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While the Russian foreign ministry criticised the mention of cooperation in the nuclear energy sector in the declaration, saying that it would spark an arms race. Russia has repeatedly railed against what it sees as the United States growing military presence across Asia. Moscow said Washington’s and Nato’s drive for “decisive military superiority” would “bring nothing but escalating tensions”.

It seems that South Korea is becoming more involved in the United States’ efforts to contain China’s influence in the Pacific. This includes the signing of the Washington Declaration, which emphasized the need for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, South Korea has been conducting joint military exercises with the US and Japan, which has drawn criticism from China. It remains to be seen how much South Korea will continue to align itself with the US in the ongoing geopolitical rivalry with China, but it is clear that Seoul has started playing a more active role than in the past.