

ENCOURAGE SECURITY DEBATES: KEY ALLIES ARE NOT PROLIFERATION RISKS

by
Daehan Lee

The global nonproliferation community has treated allies and adversaries alike when it comes to nuclear-related issues, in order to preserve the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) which is widely regarded as conventional wisdom. Such ‘policy correctness’ based on morality sounds principled, but it is strategically incoherent in practice. Nowhere is this duality more visible than in how the nonproliferation school responds to open academic discussion of nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) and [nuclear latency](#) in key friendly states like [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#). At this critical time when nuclear-armed adversaries expand their arsenals with impunity, pressuring democratic U.S. allies for merely debating security options to support Washington reveals the logical weakness and irony of the nonproliferation orthodoxy.

Building Trust and Alliance Credibility

Trust-building among allies is undeniably important, and it can only be built through open and candid dialogue. What is increasingly troubling, however, is how the nonproliferation community [selectively discourages](#) such dialogue on improvements emerging from close U.S. allies based on honesty and common threat awareness. It may be politically convenient to keep the status quo, but this gradually corrodes alliance credibility and strengthens the nuclear predominance of the authoritarian bloc.

As debates over allies’ SSN and nuclear latency have surfaced in the United States, South Korea, and Japan, their academic and policy communities have sought to engage through [dialogues](#) across multiple tracks. These efforts reflect their transparency, alliance consultation, and mutual trust—not defiance. Yet they are frequently portrayed and generalized by nonproliferation advocates as [destabilizing](#), despite

the deliberative processes that responsible allies should welcome.

This kind of reaction exposes a fundamental flaw in contemporary nonproliferation thought: the belief that suppressing allies’ nuclear debates is equivalent to preventing proliferation. Treating scholarly discussion itself in allied states as a proliferation risk reveals [a loss of confidence](#) in the norms that nonproliferation advocates claim to defend. Silence or endurance does not preserve norms; it undermines allies’ strategic thinking and the development of more assertive capabilities, which would help counter the security threats of authoritarian states more effectively and in a timely manner.

Displaying Double Standards

In the case of South Korea, [critics](#) often [argue](#) that Seoul is “framing” its nuclear latency discourse under the cover of civilian nuclear energy, a complete fuel cycle, or naval propulsion. In fact, however, such framing has been central to nuclear diplomacy since the first nuclear age. The NPT itself was built on delicately [constructed political frames](#)—promising eventual disarmament by nuclear-weapon states, peaceful nuclear use, and security assurances for non-nuclear states, none of which are fully guaranteed. The fact that these promises have been unevenly or poorly fulfilled is an [uncomfortable reality](#) that the nonproliferation community often avoids confronting.

To single out South Korea’s nuclear framing while overlooking the framing inherent in the NPT itself is a double standard. It also risks signaling that even discussing security options is unacceptable for allies, while the actual nuclear expansion of regional adversaries remains unchecked.

At this point, nonproliferation advocates typically raise familiar objections: that even implicit exceptions for allies [erode](#) the NPT’s normative foundation; that nuclear latency constitutes a ‘[slippery slope](#)’ toward weaponization; and that such debates send [dangerous signals](#) to adversaries. These concerns deserve to be taken seriously, but they overlook the fact that the NPT has functioned through strategic context and

political reality. Suppressing academic nuclear-related debates in South Korea does not reinforce the regime, but it undermines the patience that Seoul has long maintained. Norms are sustained not by silencing key allies, but by coordinating with them and aligning rules with evolving security realities.

Living in a N-Neighborhood

The [case](#) of Japan demonstrates that nuclear latency within a trusted alliance framework is not destabilizing. Its nuclear latency has not weakened nonproliferation norms; it has coexisted with them precisely because it has been embedded within alliance trust, transparency, and democratic accountability. South Korea's long-standing stance reinforces this point. For nearly five decades, Seoul has [adhered](#) to nonproliferation principles and reaffirmed them repeatedly, most recently through the [Washington Declaration](#). This [sustained restraint](#) by a non-nuclear state facing authoritarian nuclear threats should not be overlooked or lightly discounted.

If the United States had effectively constrained the nuclear [expansion](#) of North Korea and China, concerns over academic debate on allies' nuclear issues would have been unnecessary. Unfortunately, the opposite appears to be true. Most South Koreans do not [view](#) nuclear weapons as a panacea, but as a lesser evil—an option of last resort in an increasingly hostile environment. Koreans have not politically turned to the far-right wing nor are they obsessed with nuclear weapons. The same is true of Japan. They have become realists over time, responding to persistent threats from nuclear-armed neighbors. [Vague](#) and rhetorical reassurances about extended deterrence, paired with expressed discomfort from the nonproliferation school when allies [discuss](#) nuclear issues openly, do not help U.S. grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

A core assumption among hardline nonproliferation advocates is that allies and adversaries must be treated the same to prevent horizontal proliferation. This premise is refutable. Alliances require differentiated trust. Pressuring South Korea and Japan to dissuade them from discussing SSNs or nuclear

latency while [failing to impose meaningful costs](#) on China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran for their actual nuclear expansion reflects not moral consistency, but a paralysis of allied strategic thinking.

The irony is striking: allies are urged to place unconditional faith in U.S. extended deterrence, yet are treated with suspicion whenever nuclear issues enter domestic debates. This contradiction erodes alliance confidence far more than open discussion ever could. Nonproliferation that comes at the expense of alliance trust is not sustainable.

South Korea's [brief nuclear pursuit](#) in the 1970s was driven not by revisionist ambition but by unilateral U.S. troop [withdrawal](#) initiatives. The psychological core of South Korea's security anxiety has remained consistent ever since—regardless of its extraordinary growth in both hard and soft power. Precedents such as the [Acheson Line](#), past attempts to withdraw U.S. forces, and recent [U.S. national defense strategies](#) have reinforced this anxiety. [Contemporary political trends](#) in the United States have only magnified it.

American 'Fatigue' with Global Commitments

It is important to note that the United States was initially founded as an [isolationist](#) power. This means its role as a global security guarantor does not have a particularly long history. Allies are acutely aware of American [fatigue](#) with global commitments. Yet despite living with a nuclear-armed North Korea and China for decades, South Korea's decision to remain non-nuclear with a degree of restraint has been rarely acknowledged. Any taboo against academic discussion of nuclear issues at this stage is no longer desirable.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world observed how Washington [urgently acted](#) to defend its security. South Korea, by contrast, has endured a prolonged equivalent for more than thirty years without nuclear weapons. If any other state was in the Korean Peninsula, nuclearization would likely have occurred long ago. South Korea is only now [consulting](#) with Washington to acquire SSNs, which demonstrates Seoul's significant endurance.



In today's strategic environment, suppressing allied voices on nuclear issues is no longer tenable. Unity and pressure should be directed at nuclear-armed adversaries—not at democratic allies cooperating transparently within alliances. Major allies are not proliferation risks to be managed; they are strategically [invaluable assets](#) to be trusted. Unless the nonproliferation community [confronts](#) its own [contradictions](#), it risks becoming more irrelevant to the very security challenges it seeks to address.

Debates on nuclear latency and SSNs should not be misread as an attempt to go nuclear or decouple from Washington. Rather, they reflect a broader conversation about [fairer burden sharing](#) that the United States has long [sought](#) to promote. To reorganize alliances into a more [lattice-like](#) structure, major allies such as South Korea and Japan must enhance their own capabilities. Hence, such academic and policy discussions are not confined to bilateral alliances alone. They are also closely connected to the foundations of ROK-U.S.–Japan trilateral security cooperation.

Daehan Lee is a researcher in the ROK Forum for Nuclear Strategy (ROKFNS).