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## Washington Declaration: Evolution of the Extended Deterrence

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The ROK-U.S. alliance joined hands with the nuclear umbrella. The South Korea-U.S. summit held on April 26 bolstered the will and commitments of the ROK-U.S. extended deterrence.<sup>1)</sup> The "Washington Declaration" announced at this ROK-U.S. summit included significant commitments that are likely to have an impact, such as declaring the active will of the U.S., permanently deploying U.S. strategic assets, and reflecting ROK's voices. Previous governments and experts have continuously advocated for and demanded these commitments. South Korea and the United States, in particular, agreed to establish a new "Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)," an institution that allows to reflect ROK's will and opinions as part of the extended deterrence mechanism. This symbolically demonstrates that the approach to North Korea's nuclear issues has evolved from the U.S.-centered extended deterrence to a cooperative mutual deterrence between South Korea and the United States. It is not only important, but also reassuring, that the two countries have decided to implement a variety of deterrence measures that they have not done before, but have long desired to do, and must do swiftly. However, the Declaration and commitments alone do not ensure our security. The South Korean and U.S. governments must be mindful that if follow-up measures are not implemented in a timely manner, the Declaration's objective may be watered down and its impact may be minor.

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<sup>1)</sup> The central theme of the ROK-U.S. summit held in Washington, D.C. from April 24 to 29 was the "active and forward-looking ROK-U.S. alliance." In keeping with the theme, Seoul and Washington agreed to expand practical cooperation on North Korean issues, military security, economic security, cutting-edge technology, human exchanges, and regional and global issues.

## Background of the Washington Declaration

The Washington Declaration is a product of the South Korea–U.S. alliance's strong will to respond to changes surrounding the North Korean nuclear situation. Since the breakdown of the U.S.–North Korea summit in 2019, North Korea has continued to engage in provocative behavior in order to further advance its nuclear capabilities, escalating the security crisis. Since the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in 2021, North Korea has attempted to bolster its nuclear capabilities aimed at both the United States and South Korea, disregarding calls from South Korea and the international community to resume denuclearization talks. North Korea's nuclear sprint, as well as the resulting increase in North Korea's nuclear weapons threat, has highlighted the need for an active U.S. policy adjustment while raising concerns about the effectiveness of extended deterrence. Furthermore, North Korea's improvement of tactical nuclear capabilities and hostile nuclear coercion targeted directly at the ROK sparked a debate within South Korea about the need for independent nuclear armament. Such demands, concerns, and disputes served as the context for putting the need to bolster extended deterrence through U.S. policy shifts and enhance South Korea's role as items on the agenda required of the alliance's urgent coordination.

## Contents and Meaning of the Declaration

The Washington Declaration reaffirms the United States' ironclad determination and commitment to extended deterrence, the alliance's strong mutual defense, and a rock-solid combined defense posture. This is also a concrete manifestation of active consultations between the two countries to significantly strengthen the

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Although all of the topics discussed are essential to our national interests, the value of our alliance, and regional and global peace, it goes without saying that the most significant agenda item was North Korea's nuclear issue. This paper does not intend to explore the overall features of the ROK–U.S. summit, but confines its assessment to the details of the Washington Declaration.

implementation of extended deterrence after South Korea-U.S. summit held in May 2022. To this end, the main contents and meanings agreed upon by South Korea and the United States in the Declaration are as follows.

First, the will and content of the extended deterrent commitments have been greatly bolstered. The U.S. promised 'immediate consultations' with the ROK and an 'overwhelming and decisive response' utilizing all of its capabilities, including nuclear weapons, if the DPRK launched a nuclear attack on the ROK. It is significant that the leaders of the two countries affirmed for the first time the U.S.'s more evolved commitments to defense and extended deterrence for South Korea in a separate document on the 70th anniversary of the signing of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. The following are strong signals for the extended deterrence: the U.S. President Biden issued an unprecedented warning for the first time to North Korea that if it launches nuclear attacks, it will face the end of the regime: and ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol paid his first state visit to the Pentagon's National Military Command Center (NMCC)<sup>2)</sup>, the center of U.S. security. The strong will of the United States can also be validated through the strengthened extended deterrence. The key is to "regularly mobilize" the world's strongest nuclear strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula, including the Ohio class of nuclear-powered submarines (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic missile, Nuclear-powered: SSBN).

Second, the extended deterrence has evolved into a cooperative deterrence system between South Korea and the United States. In November 2022, South Korea and the U.S. already discussed the idea of cooperation in Korean-style extended deterrence at the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM). The establishment of a new Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) is an embodiment of such consultation. The NCG has a system comparable to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), but it differs

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<sup>2)</sup> The NMCC, a key command and control center of the U.S. Department of Defense, is a core U.S. defense facility that directly assists the U.S. President and other high-ranking major military commanders in case of contingency. This is the first visit to the NMCC by a South Korean President. The U.S. has not lately permitted important foreign dignitaries to visit the NMCC, as it previously only allowed a small number of persons to visit the facility, including the British Prime Minister.

in that it would not actually deploy nuclear weapons in South Korea. South Korea and the United States will be able to achieve unprecedented institutionalized cooperation through the NCG, including 1) reinforcing extended deterrence, 2) developing a nuclear strategy, and 3) controlling North Korea's threats to the nonproliferation regime. In other words, the Washington Declaration committed South Korea and the United States to closely sharing intelligence on North Korea's nuclear weapons and to cooperatively discussing nuclear strategy planning and implementation. In doing so, we have established the groundwork for our will and national interests to be reflected frequently and vigorously in U.S. decision-making about North Korea's nuclear issues. This means that through our support, including the ROK's advanced conventional weapons systems supporting the U.S. nuclear operations, a new type of extended deterrence has been established involving mutually South Korea and the U.S. as allies, not unilateral provision by the U.S.

Third, the Washington Declaration also stipulates our strong will that the ROK-U.S. alliance should set an example for the international community's norms and peace-building. Through the Declaration, the South Korean government made it clear that Seoul will 'continue to rely' on the extended deterrence with full confidence and that the ROK will contribute all our capabilities to the ROK-U.S. combined defense system. This indicates an indirect emphasis that the South Korean government will not arm itself with nuclear weapons based on the distrust of extended deterrence. This also reflects the two countries' strong consensus that Seoul and Washington will not tolerate any damage to the alliance. In addition, by complying with obligations of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that the South Korean government has observed since 1975, we can give the impression to the international community that South Korea prioritizes serving its role as a responsible member of the international community despite domestic demands for nuclear armament in the face of grave threats posed by North Korea.

## **The Washington Declaration Likely to Have a Positive Effect on Bolstering Extended Deterrence and Reducing the Threat of North Korea**

The Washington Declaration is at the core of America's unprecedented hospitality and commitments that correspond to the elevated status of the ROK-U.S. alliance as a global comprehensive strategic alliance. However, it is clear that trust and agreement alone do not guarantee security. Therefore, it is necessary to dispassionately examine the strategic implications of the commitments and agreements stipulated in the Declaration on the actual North Korean nuclear issue. The Declaration aims to strengthen the extended deterrence, the core of which is the establishment of the NCG. Therefore, the factors for evaluation will be the effectiveness and ripple effect of the extended deterrence. The criteria will be the level of expectation for qualitative changes after the Declaration.

First, NCG is a realistically viable alternative given the constraints of the strategic environment and our needs. Some compare it to NATO's NPG and question the effectiveness of NCG. However, it is difficult to compare NCG and NPG on equal terms due to different geopolitical environment of the Korean Peninsula and Western Europe, the difference between Russia and North Korea's nuclear capabilities, and the difference between the U.S.'s nuclear strategy toward North Korea and NATO's operational strategy. In particular, deploying tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, which has a narrow battlefield unlike Western Europe, is not a feasible solution to adopt as it can increase North Korea's desire for preemptive nuclear strikes. With ROK's independent nuclear armament practically not viable and concerns about the potential side effects of sharing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons looming, the best possible option for the South Korean government is to institutionally reflect our voice in the operation of U.S. nuclear forces. Permanent institutionalization of the extended deterrence, which includes ROK's role and capabilities, is an alternative that has been steadily raised and reviewed by expert groups and previous governments as North Korea's nuclear threat to South Korea becomes severe.<sup>3)</sup> The NCG is the first permanent nuclear-related consultative body of its kind that the U.S. did not

even allow for Japan. The visibility of reinforced nuclear deterrence against North Korea will be confirmed if South Korea, together with the U.S., would discuss the planning for actual use and operation of U.S. nuclear weapons, and if the ROK-U.S. Strategic Command and the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command join hands to carry out a frequent bilateral, interagency table-top simulation.

Second, if the NCG is successfully operated, the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence against North Korea will naturally increase. Some argue that the effect of NCG cannot be expected as long as the U.S. monopolizes the nuclear button. In other words, this argument assumes the possibility that the U.S. will not press the nuclear button in case of a contingency and hence downgrades the effectiveness of the NCG. However, this is not only a distortion of deterrence, but also contrary to reality. Nuclear deterrence is driven by the uncertainty that will face nuclear retaliation, not by the subject using nuclear weapons. If North Korea simultaneously elevates its threat to the U.S. mainland and South Korea by strengthening its nuclear capabilities as it is doing now, South Korea and the U.S. will subsequently plan and demonstrate various nuclear retaliation options through the NCG and make it clear to North Korea. The deterrent begins to work effectively from the moment North Korea becomes aware of the possibility of retaliation and is actually concerned about it. Although U.S. tactical nuclear weapons have been distributed in five NATO countries, the nuclear button is still under U.S. exclusive control. Nevertheless, in Western Europe, the extended deterrence against Russia, which has greater nuclear capabilities than North Korea, has long been effective.

Third, the deployment of the U.S. strategic nuclear submarine (Submersible Ship Ballistic Missile Nuclear: SSBN) on the Korean Peninsula can be effective in denying North Korea's nuclear strategy and lowering the possibility of its nuclear pre-emptive strike against South Korea. The active deployment of strategic nuclear

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<sup>3)</sup> The need to create an Asian version of the NPG, similar to the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and a South Korea-U.S. nuclear crisis management mechanism has long been raised by diplomatic and security experts groups encompassing conservatives and progressives. This has been promoted as an effective alternative, mainly by the group who argue against ROK's own nuclear armament.



submarines will undermine North Korea's securing of secondary strike capabilities against the U.S. In fact, strategic nuclear submarines equipped with the world's best anti-submarine monitoring capabilities can effectively deny the access of North Korea's ongoing nuclear-powered submarines to the U.S. coast. In addition, the stealth nature, ambush capabilities, and invincible nuclear strike abilities of strategic nuclear submarines can induce North Korea into prudence and effectively control its temptation for preemptive strikes.<sup>4)</sup> Some question the effectiveness of operations in coastal waters near the Korean Peninsula, citing the maximum range of nuclear weapons mounted on strategic nuclear submarines.<sup>5)</sup> However, the strategic nuclear submarine's nuclear attack power projection and actual areas of operation are not limited by its geographical distance from its target. In fact, during the Cold War-era, the U.S. and Soviet Union actively deployed strategic nuclear submarines near the coastal areas of each other, creating the effect of mutual deterrence. If the effect of strategic nuclear submarines is limited to a short-range distance, it will be difficult to account for China's opposition to strategic nuclear submarines entering and leaving the Korean Peninsula.

Fourth, concerns about the ripple effect of the Washington Declaration should be evaluated. Some are concerned about the possibility of strengthening the trilateral security cooperation among North Korea, China, and Russia in response to the Washington Declaration and even further solidifying the new Cold War structure. The sensitive reaction of China and Russia is natural as expected, given that strengthening the alliance inevitably induces the rival camp in the region to develop the desire and necessity of the balancing. North Korea will also try not to undermine

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<sup>4)</sup> Until now, there have been constant concerns among the expert groups that deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons could motivate North Korea to set South Korea as a goal of preemptive strike. By utilizing strategic nuclear submarines, a dual effect can be expected: maintaining the nuclear deterrent effect through the tactical nuclear relocation; but preventing side effects.

<sup>5)</sup> A strategic nuclear submarine is practical, powerful, and expensive given that its operational range covers both the coastal and ocean. The maximum range of nuclear missiles mounted on strategic nuclear submarines should be interpreted not to mean that nuclear deterrence can be expected only from a distance, but to mean that the deterrence can be exercised "even from a distance" where pre-detection and preemptive measures targeting the enemy is unlikely.

its grip on the political circumstances and try to secure a stable regional order for nuclear advancement by closely cozying up to its traditional allies. However, China and Russia will not tolerate North Korea's nuclear weapons program due to the Washington Declaration, and it is highly unlikely that they will provide security support to North Korea to respond to the reinforced ROK-U.S. extended deterrence. Russia, which is struggling in the war against Ukraine, has no such ability and room. It will be burdensome for China to expand and deepen its confrontational front with the U.S. beyond Taiwan to the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, the security risks we have to bear will not be great, and concerns over the formation of a new Cold War order are groundless at best. Even if a new Cold War situation is formed, it is necessary to make it clear that the power competition at the global level and North Korea's nuclear development and provocation are structural and direct factors.

## Conclusion

The foundation of deterrence lies a strong nuclear retaliation ability. Deterrence begins to work by strongly communicating the will to use that ability to the other party. Through the Washington Declaration, the U.S. strategic nuclear submarine will be deployed on the Korean Peninsula for the first time in nearly 40 years. For the first time, the U.S. officially declared an extended deterrence commitment to an individual country in writing. And the U.S. President, the commander-in-chief of the military, directly announced to the outside world the will to provide the nuclear umbrella and launch nuclear retaliation. There has never been a precedent in history where the United States has offered a stronger commitment of extended deterrence than before the Washington Declaration. Therefore, it goes without saying that the foundation and conditions for extended deterrence have improved compared to pre-Declaration. Of course, North Korea can deploy coercion and make strategic provocations taking issue over the strengthened extended deterrence. However, North Korea's fierce criticism and threats of provocation is a testament of how unfavorable the Declaration is to the North. North Korea must have been conceited



that there is a "window of opportunity" that can effectively overpower the South Korea-U.S. alliance by strengthening its nuclear capabilities. However, unattainable goal-setting and reckless strategic choices will only invite the opposite effect of exposing one's security to threats and opening only the "window of vulnerability." The Washington Declaration is the living embodiment of such strategic lesson.

There are, however, things that we must keep in mind. First, it is important to quickly implement the Washington Declaration and make it sustainable. The Washington Declaration has been promoted based on the consensus of South Korea and the U.S. that institutional strengthening of the extended deterrence was urgently required. If South Korea and the U.S. do not rush to implement follow-up measures, the will of the U.S., the binding force and effect of the Declaration will be put into question, and unnecessary domestic controversy could be triggered. In particular, the attention should be paid to prevent the decoupling between South Korea and the U.S. from occurring in the process of implementation. The South Korea-U.S. working group that broke down during the Moon Jae-in government should be taken as a lesson. Second, since our ultimate aim is denuclearization of North Korea, we should not underestimate the driving force of constructive cooperation between China and Russia. The ROK government should actively explain to China and Russia the inevitability and justification of strengthening the extended deterrence. In particular, as North Korea's denuclearization is delayed and the security threat facing South Korea and the U.S. increases, it should be explicitly conveyed that subsequent reinforced deterrence measures by South Korea and the U.S. will continue to be inevitable into the future. Only when China and Russia strongly demand North Korea to refrain from provocations and return to dialogue and join constructive efforts for denuclearization will there be room for the U.S. to stop expanding its influence in the region. Without the efforts of China and Russia, the second and third Washington Declarations will continue to emerge. ©KINU 2023

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