

North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program and Three Approaches in South Korea

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Abstract

Why is everyone so eager to discuss North Korea's nuclear weapons program? Because it is central to understanding inter-Korean relations in the post-Cold War era and to grasping the current security dynamics of Northeast Asia. According to the Federation of American Scientists (2025), it is estimated to possess about 50 nuclear warheads, along with enough fissile materials to build up to 90 in total. The cost of developing North Korea's nuclear weapons is estimated to range between \$4.75 billion and \$10.5 billion at minimum. This means ordinary North Koreans have effectively skipped about half to one meal per day as a consequence of resources diverted to the nuclear weapons program. However, North Korea's current nuclear arsenal appears insufficient to coerce the United States or the Republic of Korea decisively, even though it provides a limited deterrent. If North Korea continues to expand its fissile-material production for military purposes, it may substantially increase its stockpile of nuclear warheads in the coming years—while ordinary citizens suffer greater deprivation. Then, what do South Koreans talk about in response to North Korea's nuclear threats? The first group views that South Korea's conventional military superiority, combined with the U.S. extended deterrence commitment, may be sufficient to deter North Korea from launching a major war, including nuclear strikes. The second group advocates for closer nuclear cooperation between the ROK and the United States, including the exchange of nuclear information and joint nuclear exercises. The third group demands the development of indigenous nuclear weapons, driven by uncertainties arising from by North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities and perceptions of the U.S.' relative decline in power. Observing how nuclear dynamics on the peninsula evolve is not only a matter of regional stability but also of New Zealand's own long-term security and prosperity.