US, South Korea sign new nuclear pact

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The United States and South Korea reached an agreement on the latter's nuclear program this week after nearly five years of negotiations. The deal will allow South Korea to expand its nuclear activities, softening previous provisions designed to prevent Seoul's development of nuclear weapons.

The pact was signed Wednesday between US Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert and Park No-byeok, South Korea's lead negotiator on nuclear cooperation issues. The 21-point agreement calls for the establishment of a high-level panel to oversee its implementation. It will expire in 20 years, with the door left open for future amendments.

The treaty still requires the approval of President Obama and the US Congress, as well as South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

Negotiator Park No-byeok told a news conference following the signing ceremony: "As the existing accord sealed 40 years ago had various components that needed to be improved, the new one contains various progress focusing on three main areas—spent fuel management, a steady fuel supply, and reactor export promotion."

The US embassy in Seoul released a statement saying: "This agreement marks a major milestone for the US-ROK [Republic of Korea] alliance and reinforces the alliance as a linchpin of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region."

Negotiations over South Korea's nuclear program had been ongoing since 2010. A 1974 agreement was set to expire last year. However, with the two sides at an impasse, it was extended for two years to give negotiators more time.

South Korea's primary concern was to establish its right to enrich uranium and reprocess spent nuclear fuel rods, both of which will technically continue to be banned under the new treaty. These processes could provide South Korea with an avenue to produce weapons-grade nuclear material.

New provisions, however, will allow South Korea to take steps toward uranium enrichment. Seoul, using material obtained only from the US, will be able to enrich uranium up to 20 percent under the oversight panel's supervision. The agreement further states that future consultations could be held on this issue. "It is meaningful that we have opened the pathway for uranium enrichment," a foreign ministry official stated on condition of anonymity.

South Korea will also be allowed to conduct research into a type of fuel reprocessing known as pyroprocessing—a method of recycling spent fuel that makes it more difficult to weaponize.

South Korea argued during the negotiations that the ability to enrich fuel would allow it to pursue energy deals with other countries. As one example, Seoul reached an agreement with Saudi Arabia in March to research the possibility of constructing two nuclear reactors over the next two decades, a deal valued at $2 billion.

South Korea, the world's fifth largest nuclear energy producer, is also concerned that it is running out of space to store its used fuel rods. Currently 24 nuclear plants supply nearly 40 percent of the country's energy needs and it is estimated that storage facilities will be filled to capacity within a decade. The new deal allows this spent fuel to be reprocessed in a third country approved by the US.

The United States is concerned that if given the opportunity, South Korea could develop its own nuclear weapons, thereby eroding Washington's influence and stoking a regional nuclear arms race. In 2013, the US expressed similar concerns in relation to Japan when the latter opened the Rokkasho reprocessing plant, capable of producing enough weapons-grade plutonium to build 2,000 bombs annually.

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The nuclear deal underscores South Korea's dependent role within the US alliance. While making a few relatively minor concessions, the US continues to dictate what Seoul can and cannot do. The US is hostile to any alteration to the current relationship because South Korea is integral to any future war against China.

Washington's concerns are not unfounded. Numerous figures within the South Korean ruling class have voiced their support for obtaining nuclear weapons. This includes conservative journalists and former right-wing lawmaker Song Yeong-seon, a longtime advocate of South Korean nuclear weapons. Chung Mong-joon, another former Saenuri Party lawmaker, son of the Hyundai Group founder, and one-time party leader, has also expressed his backing for such a plan.

In 2013, following North Korea's third nuclear test, Chung stated during a speech at the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference in Washington that South Korea should consider withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it ratified in 1975, and "match North Korea's nuclear progress step by step while committing to stop if North Korea stops." Chung claimed: "The only thing that kept the Cold War cold was the mutual deterrence afforded by nuclear weapons."

While the government has never endorsed Chung's position, the idea has been considered within South Korean ruling circles, to varying degrees, for decades. South Korea's nuclear activities date back to the 1950s, but it was not until the 1970s that the program took off.

In late 1971, the military dictator Park Chung-hee, the current president's father, instructed his staff to draw up plans to develop nuclear weapons. The following year, the US and South Korea signed the 1972 Atomic Energy Agreement, under which Seoul purchased an American nuclear reactor. However, once it became clear that Park was eyeing the acquisition of nuclear weapons, Washington forced the South Korean regime to sign an amended agreement in 1974 and ratify the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1975.

Despite these treaties, the Park government's program carried on for two more years in secret in an effort to develop a nuclear bomb and a ballistic missile, known as the Baekkom (White Bear), as the preferred delivery system. In 1976, Park acquiesced to US pressure to give up the nuclear weapons program.

Through the latest agreement, Washington is again seeking to ensure that South Korea remains dependent on the US "nuclear umbrella" and thus an integral part of its military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region against China.

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