

TACKLING THE THREAT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE U.S.-SOUTH KOREA COOPERATION AGREEMENT, THE WASHINGTON DECLARATION

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On the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol not only sang “American Pie” at the White House but also sealed an important cooperation agreement with his American counterpart Joe Biden to protect the Korean Peninsula from a nuclear attack by the likes of North Korea. Under the new pact, labelled [the “Washington Declaration”](#), U.S. strategic assets will be [deployed around the Korean Peninsula](#) and a joint Nuclear Consultative Group will share tactical information, engage in joint training, and coordinate military responses to any potentially hostile actions by North Korea. While Washington will remain the sole authority deciding on whether or not to carry out a nuclear response in any such eventuality, the Biden administration will step up its contribution to symbolic deterrence against the North by sending, for the first time in 40 years, nuclear-armed submarines to the region, though they are unlikely to be a permanent deployment. U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea were withdrawn from the region in 1991. Mr. Biden also used strong words to corroborate the strategic support that Washington has lent to Seoul, when he said, “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” — language that was similar to what former U.S. President Donald Trump had used in a similar context.

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. 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. However distant the prospect seems at the moment, the only way out of this dangerously unstable stalemate is for both sides to return to the negotiating table and find modalities to deescalate the situation on the ground and institutionalise peace-building initiatives in the longer term.

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