



## South Korea, U.S. to Conduct New Rounds of Nuclear Talks

South Korea and the United States will conduct talks on nuclear deterrence on December 15 as part of Washington's commitment to share expertise with Seoul when planning for a possible conflict with North Korea.

The office of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol confirmed on December 12 that the second Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting will take place in Washington, D.C., five months after the group's inaugural meeting.

U.S. President Joe Biden and Yoon proclaimed the establishment of the NCG during a summit in April as part of a new "Washington Declaration," under which Seoul also made a renewed pledge not to unilaterally pursue nuclear weapons.

Moreover, Yoon has hitherto praised the formation of the nuclear group as an upgraded alliance that hopes to boost "extended deterrence" against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman Kim Myung-soo had a phone call with his American counterpart Charles Q. Brown on December 12, the JCS revealed in a statement.

During the talks, the two agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and to tackle Pyongyang's deepening military relations with Russia.

Kim and Brown also confirmed plans to introduce a real-time data-sharing system to monitor North Korean missiles by the end of this year alongside Japan, the JCS added.

Meanwhile, North Korea has issued a fresh warning against the United States and South Korea, claiming that the duo's joint military drills would eventually give rise to a "destruction" of the Korean peninsula.

Such a warning has been widely perceived as Pyongyang's attempt to lay the foundations for developing its nuclear capabilities amid its inability to match the conventional capabilities of the United States and South Korea.

One analyst also noted that the warning could also be aimed at the North Korean audience for "internal cohesion" to rationalize dictator Kim Jong-un's policy line of promoting his nation's nuclear capability.

"Currently, North Korea is in a period of summarizing its overall, annual national achievements," said Cheon Seong-whun, a former security strategy secretary for South Korea's presidential office. "By highlighting what it claims as a threat posed by the allies' security coordination, North Korea is justifying Kim Jong Un's policy to enhance nuclear capabilities."



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Cheon also pointed out that the move may also help boost North Korea's internal unity, signaling that the policy of enhancing nuclear capabilities will persist in the coming years.

"Both the South Korean and U.S. governments should avoid excessively escalating the situation," the pundit cautioned. "Efforts are needed to manage the situation stably."

Labeling the South a "puppet" and a "mad dog," the North's state-run *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper said on December 11 that Seoul has been "obsessed with provoking an invasion war" by issuing "belligerent statements" over the past weeks.

"Observing the war exercises conducted in just over a month, the extent of the puppet's war frenzy becomes self-evident," the paper continued, claiming that Seoul's joint drills with the United States were a "reckless" action, destined to cause "destruction."

The North's statement came amid a series of joint military exercises conducted by the United States and South Korea last month. Although Washington and Seoul have claimed that the drills were defensive in nature, Pyongyang has condemned the exercises as "invasion practices," regarding them as a significant threat to the security of its regime.

Shortly after the report, the South promptly dismissed Pyongyang's allegations.

South Korea's unification ministry spokesperson Koo Byoung-sam highlighted during a briefing on Monday that it was North Korea that was culpable for worsening tensions in the Korean Peninsula.

Koo voiced Seoul's official regret, saying that it regarded the report as an "unilateral criticism."

Recently, North Korea set up Guard Posts armed with weapons along its border with the South, with some regarding the move as part of Pyongyang's strategy to put pressure on Seoul, which may lead to further provocative clashes on the front line.

Although South Korean officials initially doubted that Kim Ju-ae, the daughter of North Korea's Kim, could be her father's heir apparent, they are now having to reconsider their past assessments.

During her first public appearance walking hand in hand with her father as they inspected the launch of the intercontinental ballistic missile Hwasong-17, the younger Kim, said to be 10 or 11 in 2023, has made a total of 19 public appearances as of the time of writing.

She is always seen beside her father, with the state-run North Korean media hailing her as "Beloved Child" or "Respected Child."

After the [successful launch of North Korea's first spy satellite on November 21](#), she was promoted to "Morning Star General."

The title was first used to allude to her great-grandfather Kim Il-sung, founder of the North Korean regime, and later her father, before he rose to power in 2011 in his 20s.

In line with her new title, Ju-ae no longer dons the girlish ponytail from a year before, but now adopts the more mature hairdo of her mother, Ri Sol-ju.

Significantly, a photo of her published on December 1 shows Ju-ae in the foreground for the first time, while her father stood behind her in matching leather jackets and sunglasses during a visit to the North Korean air force headquarters.

In March 2023, lawmaker Yoo Sang-bum told local media after a closed-door briefing by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) that the agency believed that Kim Jong-un, said to be 39 in 2023, was too



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young and healthy to designate a successor so early.

However, on December 3, NIS chief Cho Tae-yong said on a television program that he thought that Ju-ae was the heir apparent to her father.

Even South Korea's Unification Ministry — which had shared the agency's earlier skepticism — now says that it sees signs that indicate that Kim's daughter could be next in line.

During a foreign media event on December 12, Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho noted the “escalating level of protocol” accorded to the girl in her recent appearances.

He said that “you can see from state media images that when she visited the Naval Command in August and then the Air Force Command on November 30, the commanders and officers were all saluting her.”

Kim Yung-ho also cited North Korea's Founding Day military parade on September 9, when North Korean military leader Park Jong-chon, a close associate of Kim, was seen kneeling and whispering into Ju-ae's ears.

“If we look at these things, we cannot rule out the possibility of Ju-ae's succession to power given that they are putting her on the main stage so early. We will need to keep a close watch on this.”

Kim Yung-ho opined that early succession planning is the regime's effort to secure its stability.

He said North Korea is experiencing great difficulties internally, adding that it is withdrawing embassies owing to budget constraints and a chronic lack of food, noting that the North Koreans are watching South Korean K-dramas and listening to K-pop.

“With the Korean Wave culture spreading in North Korea, we are seeing signs that North Koreans are starting to move away from their loyalty to the regime. With this fourth succession, the regime is trying to strengthen its internal solidarity.”

Some analysts who had voiced reservations about Ju-ae being lined up as Kim's successor point to the idea of her being a decoy while Kim grooms his son.

Observers had believed Ju-ae to be the second of Kim's three children, with the eldest being a boy.

The older Kim has never been seen with his other children.

In May, Radio Free Asia quoted Kim's schoolmate João Micaelo from his Swiss boarding school as saying that he has not heard Kim speak of any other of his children besides Ju-ae.

Kim Yung-ho said at the event at Korea Press Center in Seoul that his ministry is still “continuing efforts to confirm” if the North Korean leader has a son or not.

Asked by *The Straits Times* for his perspective on whether the communist North Korean regime would appoint a female successor, Kim Yung-ho smiled and said this was a tough question.

He said, “Confucian traditions remain in North Korean society. They still have a preference for boys over daughters. But will it influence the succession of the leadership? I think this is the biggest issue at hand. My personal view is that the impact on such decisions will be minimal.”



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