

S Korea, US discussing joint nuclear exercises, says Yoon

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South Korean president says US assurances of 'extended deterrence' no longer enough in the face of North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has said that Seoul and Washington are discussing joint exercises involving US nuclear assets in order to counter North Korea's growing atomic and missile programmes.

In an interview with the Chosun Ilbo newspaper, published on Monday, Yoon said Washington's existing "nuclear umbrella" and "extended deterrence" were no longer enough to reassure South Koreans.

He was referring to the ability of the United States military, particularly its nuclear forces, to deter attacks on its allies.

"What we call extended deterrence was also the US telling us not to worry because it will take care of everything, but now, it's difficult to convince our people with just that," he said. "The US government also understands that to some degree."

To better respond to North Korea's nuclear threats, Seoul wants to take part in the operation of US nuclear forces, he said.

"The nuclear weapons belong to the United States, but planning, information sharing, exercises and training should be jointly conducted by South Korea and the United States," Yoon said, adding Washington is also "quite positive" about the idea.

Yoon's remarks come a day after North Korean state media reported that its leader Kim Jong Un called for developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and an "[exponential increase](#)" of the country's nuclear arsenal to counter what he termed as hostility from the US and South Korea.

Kim also told a [meeting of the ruling Workers Party](#) last week South Korea has now become his country's "undoubted enemy" and rolled out new military goals, hinting at another year of intensive weapons tests and tension.

On Sunday, North Korea fired a short-range ballistic missile off its east coast in a rare late-night New Year's Day weapons test, following [three ballistic missiles](#) launched the previous day, capping a year marked by a record number of missile tests.

North Korea's race to advance its nuclear and missile programmes has renewed debate over South Korea's own nuclear armaments, with a majority of South Koreans favouring the development of a domestic atomic weapons programme, but Yoon said that maintaining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons remained important.

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Inter-Korean ties have long been testy but have been even more frayed since Yoon took office in May.

Yoon's comments on the nuclear exercises are the latest demonstration of his tough stance on North Korea.

Last week, he urged the military to prepare for a war with "overwhelming" capability following [North Korean drones crossing into South Korea](#).

Analysts say the tensions could worsen.

“This year could be a year of crisis with military tension on the Korean peninsula going beyond what it was like in 2017,” said Hong Min, a senior researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, referring to the days of the “fire and fury” under the administration of former US President Donald Trump.

“North Korea’s hardline stance ... and aggressive weapons development when met with South Korea-US joint exercises and proportional response could raise the tension in a flash, and we cannot rule out what’s similar to a regional conflict when the two sides have a misunderstanding of the situation,” Hong said.

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