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Threat for Threat: Responding to the Security Dilemma on the Korean Peninsula

How South Korea can deter its nuclear neighbor—without going nuclear itself.

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The Evolving Security Environment

The Korean Peninsula has re-emerged as one of the key areas of concern in U.S. foreign policy, propelled by the often unpredictable choices of the secretive and mercurial North Korean leadership, North Korea’s success in acquiring nuclear weapons technology, and the political and military cover extended to the North by China and, to a lesser extent, Russia.

While the handover of the formal “supreme leader” powers at the death of Kim Jong-Il this past December to a younger member of the Kim clan was not altogether unexpected, the extent of the 28-year old’s Kim Jong-un real power remains a mystery. What is more certain, given the record of the last two years, is that North Korea’s newly acquired nuclear arsenal has untied its hands in using military actions against South Korea as a part of its diet of regime maintenance and power consolidation.

The apparent continuity of North’s policies toward its friends and enemies, much emphasized by the North Korean official sources in the wake of Kim Jon-un’s ascension, belies the fundamental instability of the present status quo. Its more immediate manifestations include the sinking of the South Korean naval corvette Cheonan resulting in the deaths of 46 of its crewmen, and the artillery’s shelling of the South Korean border island Yeonpyeong – both, according to media reports, under the operational command of the future “supreme leader.” But it also features the pattern of increasing threats of future escalations in response to defensive measures from the South and its allies.

The more aggressive posture from North Korea, exacerbated by the failure of the six-party talks (North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States) to obtain any kind of lasting progress, underscores the looming security dilemma for the South and its primary allies, the U.S. and Japan. Allowing the North to engage in military provocations unpunished encourages it to turn South Korea’s peace into a hostage to be ransomed for economic or other
assistance for Kim Chong-Il’s heirs. Taking military measures to respond to it, however, risks triggering a nuclear action from the North’s leaders, who may view such measures as threatening their very existence and leaving them with little to lose.

The risk of nuclear action from the desperate North is a double-edged sword for it and for China. It ties the hands of South Korea and its allies but, if deemed too great, puts strong pressure on China to use its influence to remove the source of the threat. Doing so, however, would for China mean removing an important source of its influence – something it is unlikely ever to want to do outright. The outcome, then, is a game of cat and mouse with the South: a succession of actions stoking its fears about the North’s nukes, interspersed with rhetorical moves to quell those fears lest they are perceived as going too far.

Are South Korea and its allies forced to accept the status quo, or are there steps that they can take to neutralize or at least mitigate the threats from the North?

**An Illness to be Managed**

At least for the foreseeable future, there is little hope of resolving the present security dilemma through negotiations. The rise of China’s economic power has made it less susceptible to pressures to rein in North Korea and more willing to allow it a longer leash for adventurous actions against the South. This accounts for the universally observed growing Chinese resistance to taking a tough line on the North. Meanwhile, the hope that the North will accede to de-nuclearization is rapidly vanishing, as the North Koreans see their nuclear weapons program as an indispensable guarantor of their security. As the North’s officials were quick to point out at the start of the NATO military action against Gadhai’s government in Libya, such action would have been difficult to imagine had Gadhai not chosen to shut down the country’s nuclear weapons program (built on North Korean blueprints).

It seems clear that if negotiations with North Korea, whether in a six-party or in some other regional framework, are aimed at the dismantling of its nuclear program, they are likely to lead to failure. While giving up the nuclear program may serve the interests of North Korea, it does not, at least at this time, serve the interests of its leaders and their backers.

It is also clear that the United States, with or without South Korea, is highly unlikely to engage in any kind of decisive action to change the regime in the North or to de-nuclearize it forcibly. Three key factors argue against it. First, with a guarantee of Chinese and likely Russian opposition in the UN Security Council, there simply is no appetite in the post-Iraq world for unilateral military action on that scale. Second, the U.S. is not prepared to cope with the range of possible reactions to it from China – a country whose economic policy toward the U.S. has
fundamental repercussions for American monetary and fiscal stability and whose economic and military capabilities can easily sustain a protracted proxy conflict with the U.S.

The third, and no less important factor, is that with any such preemptive action, one cannot rule out the possibility that some of the North’s attack capability may, at least initially, survive and be used by its desperate leaders in a nuclear response. It is this worry that, in one form or another, makes the present security dilemma for the South so grave. Although grounded more in guesswork than solid fact, the possibility it evokes makes preemptive military action against the North all but impossible.

The upshot is that, in the short and likely in the medium run, the North Korean threat is not going away. It is an illness that, for now, cannot be effectively treated, but South Korea and its allies should seek to manage it to the best of their capabilities. The relevant question is about the best means of doing so.

**Against Defensive Nuclearization**

According to a recent estimate, over two thirds of South Koreans now prefer that their military acquire nuclear weapons. Prominent establishment politicians have actively pushed for returning to the development of the nuclear capability that the country set aside in 2004. The proponents of the South’s nuclearization maintain that an effective second-strike capability is needed to bolster its deterrence both against North Korea’s growing nuclear arsenal and, indirectly, against the North’s conventional military provocations, which are backed by the threat of nuclear escalation from the North.

Given its technology and purposes, the North’s nuclear devices are, likely, both relatively primitive and high-yield – not the highly sophisticated low-yield precision tactical weapons that were developed by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R at the peak of the Cold War. To be effective in wreaking the kind of devastation that would be needed for successful second-strike nuclear deterrence against such weapons, the South’s weapons would need to be similarly relatively high-yield. Given the collateral costs, however, threats to use face a severe credibility challenge when they come from a liberal society with transparent government decision-making and effective channels of government accountability – that is, a society in which government actions have to withstand the test of plausible justifiability to its citizens on the grounds of national interest.

This is an argument that should seem familiar to those who remember the nuclear strategy debates from the not-so-distant age of the Cold War. But there is an important caveat. The vastness of Soviet territory and the concentration of its population in much smaller geographic enclaves attenuated the force of this argument in the context of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear standoff.
in the way that is not the case for the standoff between North Korea and South Korea. The Korean peninsula is a relatively small and connected area with divided families on each side of the border and hopes of future unification. A nuclear attack in such an environment would be devastating, but a retaliatory strike would be as well, and its pragmatic value after the initial attack – given its failure as a prior deterrent – would be simply hard to justify. Of course, this argument extends to the automatic “doomsday devices”: there is always an incentive to have a secret override not only to avoid Dr. Strangelove scenarios but also for the pragmatic reason of avoiding what would then be pointless devastation.

Even if the retaliatory second-strike use of nuclear weapons did not lack credibility, its deterrent effect on societies like North Korea is fundamentally weakened by the organizing principles of their domestic politics. In a closed society with government decision-making that lacks transparency and wide accountability, the key political decision-makers are not selected for the proximity between their values and interests and those of the population as a whole. Worse yet, in a dynastic totalitarian regime, they are selected neither for the clarity of their judgment, nor, indeed, for their psychological health. The key implication is that what might be effective in deterring offensive actions from countries like South Korea or even the Soviet Union should not be expected to be effective in deterring a North Korea.

The bottom line is that a nuclear second-strike capability for the South is unlikely to be credible and persuasive to the North’s leaders, and thus is unlikely to be effective as a deterrent.

A Better Alternative

Rather than pushing to go nuclear, South Korea should adopt a well-calibrated strategy of conventional military response. The strategy that is both feasible and well-suited to the present security environment is one of conventional automatic proportional transparent retaliation (CAPT-R). The five key principles of this strategy are as follows. First, conventional military actions from the North must receive an automatic (non-discretionary) response from the South, without delay and without further attempts at negotiation with the North or its proxies. Second, this response must be entirely proportional – that is, to each possible target for the North, South Korea must associate a comparable target in the North, with the exception of substituting military targets for the civilian targets hit by the North. Third, South Korea must publicly announce and widely publicize the proportionality of its schedule of targets, to make transparent the meaning and limited nature of its retaliatory response. Fourth, South Korea must publicly announce and continually reinforce its adherence to these principles, possibly with international monitoring to reinforce its credibility to the North. Fifth, the United States must endorse those principles and commit to the course of actions they would dictate.
In mandating predictable automatic non-discretionary response, this strategy shares some features of the automatic nuclear response devices. However, because it calls for a limited conventional response, it avoids their credibility problems. Where a country like South Korea faces incentives to get around a doomsday device, it has no such incentives when committing itself to a limited conventional response. Further, if such a response is automatic, South Korea would forego the threat escalation that a delay in the response would generate. A provocation from the North would have a price attached to it that would be exacted immediately upon its commission. Given the publicity requirements of the strategy, that price would be anticipated by the North’s leaders, thus creating the credible deterrence that the South now seeks.

A key asset of CAPT-R is that, while denying the aggressors the benefits of strengthening their own hands through unpunished displays of machismo, it avoids two key negative scenarios: one in which the North’s leaders come to believe all is being lost and in desperation “go nuclear” and another in which the more aggressive members of the North’s leadership come to benefit by forcing the hand of others with the scare of larger-scale retaliation from the South. The transparent parity-based nature of military response would enable the North Korean leaders to ascertain its well-defined limits. While being pushed back, they would know throughout where the push stops. Here the United States’ commitment to the proposed strategy is essential: the strategy will not work if South Korea is bound by it, but the U.S. is not.

There are two caveats: First, the automatic response is most plausible when the attack that triggers it is delivered in a single blow from a distance, rather than through a substantial military incursion or invasion of territory. This points to the limitation of relying on CAPT-R as an overarching military strategy. However, the attacks against which this strategy is effective are exactly the kinds of provocations that the North is engaged in, and that are unmet by the present military strategy, which builds on the military alliance with the United States and focuses on responding to the possibility of full-force attacks from the North. Second, the effectiveness of the advocated strategy must rely on the availability to the South of advanced tactical delivery weapons – rockets that can, with high precision, reach parity targets possibly deep within the North. The United States must be willing to support South Korea’s continual acquisition of such weapons and make clear to the North the reasons and conditions of their deployment. Again, international monitoring here would be highly desirable, and South Korea should embrace it as a central tenet of its defense policy. Creation of a committee of military expert monitors that, among others, includes Chinese and Russian representatives as the North’s proxies, would go a long way in communicating to North Korea the limited nature and credibility of the South’s retaliatory responses. As noted above, avoidance of a nuclear response is in the interest of China and Russia. South Korea and the United States should use this fact to impress upon the leaders of those countries the benefits of their cooperation with the proposed strategy.
Re-defining Expectations

The approach of South Korea and the United States to the current security predicament on the peninsula must be based on the sober reading of the incentives and capabilities of the relevant parties. Those factors suggest three related conclusions.

First, the nuclearization of South Korea’s military is not an attractive option. Second, South Korea need not accept the binary choice of living under the unchecked and escalating military provocations from the North or risking igniting a nuclear response from the North by resisting them. The conventional response strategy outlined above creates the conditions for both deterring the provocations from North Korea and reducing the threat of the disastrous worst-case outcomes. It is a strategy for a military response that is, indeed, a strategy for maintaining peace.

Finally, the expectations from the six-party talks need to be re-defined. Negotiations with North Korea have value, but their success should not be predicated on the North’s surrender of its nuclear arsenal and the abandonment of its nuclear program. While obviously desirable, that outcome at this point is outside the realm of the feasible, given the interests and capacities of the North’s patrons. Instead, the talks should pursue feasible goals: making transparent South Korea’s military strategy and, having established a new set of military expectations, making the case for the unprofitability of provocations from the North. Such mutual understandings can, then, lay the ground for making progress on economic questions of mutual interest, including the exchange of economic aid for the operational security of the North’s nuclear arsenal.