

Dancing with the Enemy: Nuclear Brinkmanship and the Prospect of Crisis on the Korean Peninsula

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Context

North Korea is trying to signal, through every means available, that it is determined to consolidate its state identity as a nuclear weapons state by continuously developing its nuclear weapons capability. After the August 2015 crisis sparked by mine incidents last year, North Korea gained confidence in its deterrent capability, which has been revealed in the official statement and comments by state-run media outlets. Quite noticeable in the North's New Year's address were 1) the new emphasis of "Socialist Chosun (Korea)" and 2) confidence that North Korea will "be on the right track." It seems that North Korea is now determined to use the term "Socialist Chosun" as a proper noun, which implies that it intends to re-emphasize its state identity as a socialist country on the Korean peninsula. Interestingly, a recent official statement coming out of North Korea has less emphasis on *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* but pays more attention to a revolution driven by new generations and departure from the old system, which indicates North Korea's calculated message that Kim Jong Un's era has come. North Korea is going to hold the 7th Congress of the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) in May 2016. The North's New Year's address did not mention much about the achievement in the economy and did not go into details of "tasks of the year." Therefore, Kim Jong Un, as "the center of the Party," is expected to present a blueprint for building a powerful socialist country at the Congress of the Party as a proof of North Korea's "being on the right track."

The problem is that North Korea's nuclear weapons capability continues to play a key role in this effort. North Korea's central link strategy dictates concentrating all their energy on finding the central link that can resolve all complicated matters—economic, political, and military. Currently, the international community adopts dual-track approaches to pressure North Korea by addressing North Korea's human rights concerns and strengthening economic sanctions. The logic behind these efforts is that 1) the regime itself is the cause of international concern, and 2) the regime cannot sustain the *byungjin*-line (parallel development of nuclear weapons and the economy) without fundamental changes in its behavior. North Korea, however, seems to argue that the regime itself is not the target of change and respecting "Socialist Chosun" as an equal negotiating partner would be the only way to make a breakthrough. Kim Jong Un, in particular, presented a slogan "stepping forward for final victory"¹ in his New Year's address, and he also presented a similar slogan of the year 2016—to consolidate the foundation for speeding up achieving final victory in all areas to build a militarily and

¹ The term "achieving the final victory" has appeared frequently since last year at major events such as the 66th anniversary to celebrate the establishment of the socialist regime in September, commemoration of the 62nd anniversary of the armistice treaty in July, the ceremony to confer a meritorious title on the National Choir and Moranbong Band in October, etc.

economically strong nation. Rodong Shinmun in October 2015 mentioned that strengthening nuclear deterrence capability guarantees the final victory. It should be noted that North Korea explains that developing its nuclear deterrence capability is the key to creating a virtuous cycle of stabilizing the external environment, which then enables North Korea to focus more on economic recovery. By doing so, North Korea makes a counter-argument to the current discussion on the inevitable failure of the *byungjin*-line. Right after the 4th nuclear test, Chosun Shinbo confirmed North Korea's position on this issue by explaining the North Korean style of economic revival based on deterrence.

Against these backdrops, we have such questions as “Whether North Korea is determined to consolidate the current antagonistic structure,” and “Whether there will be tension and perpetual instability on the Korean Peninsula.” The two Koreas have undergone intense competition for the recognition of “being the legitimate authority on the Korean peninsula.” Carl Schmitt defined the concept of the political as predicated on the distinction between enemy and friend.² According to this concept, the enemy is the existential outsider whose hostility threatens the state. The two Koreas perpetuate enemy relations by each defining the other as irredeemably illegitimate. The idea of Otherness has been and is essential to the two-Korea formulation. North Korea has survived for 70 years and endured the worst economic and geopolitical conditions in the 1990s. The North seems to believe that its nuclear weapons capability plays the key role in keeping a military balance against an economically and militarily strong enemy in the framework of national division.

New Challenges

What worries South Korea is that achieving “final victory” is an unfulfilled promise for the North Koreans, and hence the regime will continue taking additional measures until its nuclear deterrence capability is recognized by the international community. The recent provocation once again highlights Pyongyang's intention to go down this road. Consider the official remarks from the North: they stressed that the nuclear test on 6 January 2016 was the “first” hydrogen bomb test, hinting that more tests will follow. The North also said that the February 7th missile test was part of its 5-year space development project, declaring that more satellite launches are coming. North Korea began its space development project in 2012, and the Unha-3 launch on December 12th of that year was the first output of the 5-year program. It is possible that North Korea is preparing to launch another 5-year space development project. Assessment of the recent nuclear test seems debatable, but there is a possibility that North Korea made advancement in making a boosted weapon. One should note that North Korea announced that it has made significant progress towards the development of thermo-nuclear power in May 2010, and has hinted that it is developing the capability to miniaturize its nuclear arsenal ever since.

² Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

It is North Korea's strategy to maintain uncertainty about its nuclear weapons capability, generating various speculations about the size, accuracy, and devastation of the bomb, and the range of its delivery means. Threat perception matters. One should note that North Korea made a rare move to maximize the psychological impact of the nuclear test. It aired a documentary film that showed technological advancement in its SLBM capability and invited CNN to the newly opened Science and Technology Center, which has exhibits of weapons systems including a replica of Unha-3, only two days after the 4th nuclear test. Many experts in South Korea assume that North Korea has already deployed, or is making preparations to deploy, Musudan missiles and KN-08. The modified KN-08 demonstrated at the 10 October 2015 parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party featured a new warhead shape, confirming the North's repeated claim that it has diversified and miniaturized nuclear warheads.

In order to develop the alliance's anti-missile operational concept into a concrete operational plan, South Korea and the United States have maintained close consultation through the newly established Deterrence Strategy Committee. However, North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capabilities will add complexity to the allied response to the threats from the North if it can increase credible risk to the security of the United States. Indeed, the existence of nuclear stockpiles in the North, regardless of their size, influences the ROK-US alliance's strategic options. As North Korea's operation against the South becomes increasingly sophisticated, close coordination in developing countermeasure planning is a challenge to the alliance. The prospect that North Korea is diversifying delivery vehicles for nuclear strikes such as TEL (Transporter-Erector Launchers)-based KN-08 and SLBM may strengthen the argument that the alliance should exert restraint in an armed conflict.

Structure of nuclear brinkmanship

As Schelling notes, regardless of the credibility of a threat to launch an all-out nuclear attack, a state can credibly make threats that leave something to chance.³ Traditionally, in a brinkmanship crisis, the action and reaction chain may continue when "defense" is possible, and both sides engage in a deliberate cost-benefit calculation to decide whether to bid up the risk or not. However, in a crisis on the Korean peninsula, where North Korea has an option of nuclear weapons use and the United States provides nuclear assurance to South Korea, each side recognizes the possibility that things could spiral out of control, not by deliberate decisions but by unpredictable and inadvertent events. North Korea can raise the risk that events will end in a nuclear exchange, and no one has the capacity to minimize damages caused by nuclear exchanges. Therefore, it is possible that both sides have an interest in not pushing the other over the brink, and thus seek compromise when a serious armed clash is ahead. Because of mutual vulnerability, such perception that the devastation of an all-out war on the Korean peninsula should be avoided would restrain each side.

³ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 199-201.

The lessons North Korea learned from the August crisis sparked by mine incidents were that both sides paid deliberate caution in their reactions and limited their options to coercive diplomacy. The South Korean defense minister vowed to “sever the vicious cycle of North Korea’s provocations,” but South Korea’s counter-fire aimed at a place near the North’s Guard Post only slightly over 500 m above the MDL (Military Demarcation Line) in response to North Korea’s fire, which violated 3.4 km from the MDL to the south. Despite its repeated emphasized position on demanding an apology from the North for the mine incident, South Korea agreed to de-escalate the situation in exchange for North Korea’s expression of “regrets.” North Korea also displayed caution, as it sent a letter through Panmunjom to ask the Blue House to settle the situation as soon as possible, even while it put its troops on a war footing. The essence of the other three major crises on the Korean peninsula⁴ were nuclear in character, but there also was a pattern that each side could find a way out of the crisis before the option of nuclear weapons use would be exercised—the armistice treaty in 1953, the Geneva Agreed Framework in 1994, and the Six-party Agreement in 2007. The crises were gradually resolved at a lower level—major armed conflict in 1950s, an indirect serious clash in the 1990s, and an indirect minor clash in the 2000s. In all cases, alliance restraint was exercised on the weaker ally in order to diffuse tension.

Instability under the structure of stability

Having a nuclear brinkmanship structure with restraints in place on the Korean peninsula does not mean, however, that there is no chance of war. As Snyder points out, nuclear brinkmanship will not prevent the use of lower levels of violence.⁵ The same is true for the situation on the Korean peninsula. Based on the belief in the strength of nuclear deterrence, the North may display boldness in engaging in low-level provocations. Traditionally, North Korea has developed both regular and irregular warfare capabilities to deter and deny the US reinforcement. It has strived to strengthen its blitz warfare and preemptive strike capabilities for conducting a sophisticated level of special assault operations. Currently, the North does not possess sufficient war reserve material to wage a prolonged all-out war because its paramilitary units are poorly equipped, soldiers tend to avoid participating in training sessions, and many troops are engaging in sideline activities for economic purposes. Besides, its current transportation capability is severely limited by poor road conditions. Because North Korea’s long-drawn-out economic hardship has had a significant impact on maintaining combat readiness of its troops, North Korea is believed to have shifted its focus to strengthening the

⁴ William Perry identified five distinct nuclear crises between the United States and North Korea during the Korean War, in 1990, 1994, 1998 and 2002. However, considering the action-reaction chain of events from 1990 to 1994 and from 1998 to 2002 respectively, we can understand that there were four nuclear crises including the recent confrontation in August 2015. William Perry, “Proliferation on the Peninsula: Five North Korean Nuclear Crises,” *Annals, AAPSS* 607 (September 2006): 78-86.

⁵ See Glenn Snyder’s discussion of the stability-instability paradox in “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabur, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 184-201.

asymmetric combat capability. Asymmetric warfare means a strategy to employ unconventional tactics in order to exploit the opponents' vulnerability by imposing restrictions on the freedom of movement and causing psychological disturbance. For example, cyber-attacks or GPS jamming on a small scale and shelling across the Northern Limit Line, where a legal dispute is on-going, are viable options for the North because it is hard for South Korea to detect North Korea's involvement in such incidents and defend accordingly.

The problem is that North Korea can employ hybrid warfare tactics. Kim Jong Un mentioned, "The Korean People's Army should strengthen the pivotal role of nuclear armed forces in all aspects of deterrence and combat operation strategies."⁶ This means that North Korea's nuclear weapons capability can have the deterrence effect of blocking the projection of reinforced US military power even though it does not use actual nuclear bombs in a war. Currently, the alliance does not have a detailed operational plan for various scenarios of North Korea's nuclear options, which range from tactical use of weapons for a limited, localized war, EMP attack, detonation of a device on the open sea, to nuclear blackmail. The allies may have different assessments on the "imminence" of North Korea's nuclear attack, confidence of China's approval of a preemptive strike on its buffer state, etc.

Implication for the alliance

The ROK's strategy against the North's nuclear threat is based on its own defense capability and US extended deterrence. However, by establishing the Kill-Chain and KAMD (Korean Air and Missile Defense) based on Aegis-equipped naval ships, Green Pine radar, an anti-ballistic missile system, and conventional precision strike capability, the ROK is striving to strengthen its independent deterrence. In reality, South Korea cannot execute the K2 (integration of Kill-Chain and KAMD) system, and US involvement should be immediate in order to guarantee operation of Kill-Chain because South Korea is dependent on US intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Currently, there are only "guidelines" for the concepts of ROK-U.S. Alliance Comprehensive Counter-missile Operations (4D Operational Concept) to detect, disrupt, destroy, and defend against North Korean ballistic missile threats. This means that the allies need to work on developing realistic deterrence and response capabilities in greater detail. Considering the fact that the United States is worried that South Korea has been pushing for an indigenous nuclear deterrence and preemptive strike against strategic weapons in the North, it may have more interest in restraining its ally. South Korea has plans to develop the KAMD into a more advanced, medium-altitude defense capability with PAC-3, M-SAM, L-SAM, etc. North Korea's scud missiles fly at a lower altitude and lower speed, but an intermediate-range missile capable of reaching Japan can be flown on a lofted trajectory with a reduced range at a faster speed. If North Korea deploys SLBMs in combat before the establishment of the K2, which is focused on the interception of land-based ballistic missiles, the

⁶ Kim Jong Un, Speech at the Party Central Committee Meeting, April 8, 2013.

utility of the new system would become questionable.

South Korea's 2014 basic military strategy guidelines⁷ disclosed a shift from a "positive deterrence" strategy to a "proactive deterrence" strategy designed to cope with asymmetric threats from North Korea. Whereas positive deterrence focuses on the early resolution of crisis situations and the prevention of conflict escalating to war, proactive deterrence includes the use of all military and non-military means, and even measures for anticipatory self-defense.⁸ In order to realize the proactive deterrence strategy, South Korea is developing a system designed to execute a strike against a North Korean missile launch site upon detection of preparations for the launch of a nuclear warhead or other ballistic missiles. However, there are practical issues for the execution of this concept. First, it needs an enormous amount of investment to secure key elements—surveillance, reconnaissance, and air-dominance. Second, it is not capable of striking all of the North's missiles before they are launched. Third, it is not easy to constantly track, in real time, the movements of TELs (transporter erector launchers) in North Korea, and it is even harder to constantly track the movements of missile submarines. Fourth, it is hard to determine whether fuel-injection and the preparation of missile launchers are intended for war preparation or are deterrence measures in the minds of the North Korean leadership. Some believe that North Korea is likely to use the nuclear weapons at an early phase of confrontation, out of fear that it cannot secure its nuclear arsenal or to keep US forces off the Korean peninsula. Others stress that North Korea has always spoken of its nuclear option as only for retaliation if "the US provokes a nuclear war"⁹ or "its territory is violated"¹⁰ and argue that the North will continue to deliberate on the strategic usefulness of the option.

Regional implication and prospect

What is more disturbing than North Korea's demonstration of its technological advances in diversifying its nuclear arsenal is a "ripple effect" in the region. North Korea's nuclear-related provocations serve to reveal differences in opinion among neighboring countries about the way to deal with the North Korean issue. North Korea's recent nuclear and missile tests revealed how hard it is to have coordinated efforts among regional countries. All the regional countries have an interest in preventing conflictual events from escalating into dire clashes, but it is also true that all have interests in utilizing the situation in a way most favorable to them. Days after North Korea claimed to have tested a hydrogen bomb, the United States responded by flying a B-52 bomber jet from Guam to Osan Air Base. The alliance decided to hold official talks on deploying THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), something that China has strongly opposed. The US decision to show solidarity

⁷ ROK Ministry of Defense, Defense Reform Basic Plan 2014-2030, March 2014.

⁸ It is believed that use of force is inevitable when threat is instant and overwhelming, leaving South Korea without any choice of other means or time for deliberation. The term "proactive" means that South Korea should be capable of conducting a precision-guided strike against the origin of North Korea's attack in order to weaken North Korea's will to fight.

⁹ *Nodong Shinmun*, April 27, 2006.

¹⁰ *Nodong Shinmun*, March 4, 2009.

between the allies invited a blowback. The next day, China expressed its discomfort and concerns about the US strategic bomber flight over the Korean peninsula, accusing the United States of exploiting the nuclear and missile tests for increasing its military presence in the Asia-Pacific.

In order to deal with an unpredictable North Korea, South Korea has believed that it needs China's help and has tried to delink China's off-peninsula concerns, such as territorial and maritime disputes, from its urgent core interests. South Korea signed up for the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, at the risk of increasing unease in the United States. The agenda of upgrading the current agreement on information-sharing with Japan to a General Security of Military Information Agreement and the Military Acquisition and Cross-Serving Agreement for trilateral security cooperation had been on the table without substantive discussions for long time. However, the nuclear test in January 2016 and missile test in February 2016 seems to have strengthened the conservative voice in South Korea. A survey shows that two-thirds of South Korean adults support the deployment of THAAD and slightly over 50 percent answered that they support introduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.¹¹ However, the same survey shows that 30 percent supported stronger sanctions on North Korea and 18 percent preferred consideration of more military options, whereas over 40 percent preferred dialogue with the North.

With regard to South Korea's choice of deterrence strategy, experts in South Korea are divided, with various opinions: 1) Conventional deterrence does not have the same effect as nuclear deterrence; 2) A balance of threat exists on the Korean peninsula, and the US extended deterrence has only psychological effect; 3) Retaliation with nuclear force against the North's nuclear attack can hinder the alliance's military operation (hence not a desirable option); 4) Even nuclear weapons cannot exterminate North Korea's HDBTs (Hard and Deeply Buried Targets); 5) South Korea has to have its indigenous nuclear capability because the United States has to consider multiple considerations in a real-time situation; and 6) The alliance can consider introducing tactical nuclear weapons for nuclear talks by asking North Korea to cooperate on verifying its nuclear program in exchange for cancellation of reintroducing US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula. If the negotiation fails, the alliance can reintroduce tactical nuclear weapons and then engage in disarmament talks to terminate the North's nuclear program in exchange for withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons. The priority of South Korea, at this juncture, should be practical, coolheaded crisis management so that the situation does not spiral out of control.

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¹¹ This survey was conducted by Yonhap News Agency and Korea Broadcasting System and reported on February 14, 2016.