

NORTH KOREA AND ASIA'S EVOLVING NUCLEAR LANDSCAPE

Challenges to Regional Stability

By Aaron L. Friedberg, Robert Jervis, J. James Kim, Jina Kim, Matthew Kroenig,
Sugio Takahashi, Michito Tsuruoka, and Christopher Twomey



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Introduction

Robert Jervis

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There is a small but not trivial chance that by the end of 2017 the United States will have used force against North Korea. The Trump administration, after declaring its predecessor's policy of "strategic patience" a failure in light of the quickening pace of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, has claimed to be embarking on a new and more belligerent policy. That the criticisms of the past ring true does not provide grounds for believing that President Donald Trump—or anyone else—has a viable alternative.

Of course the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is only the most dramatic of the challenges in Asia. In the long and even medium run, the rise of China is more challenging and could lead to a greater rearrangement of the world order, if not to a much larger war. The Chinese and North Korean situations are not unrelated to each other, and almost all observers note that the former is key to influencing the latter. This of course presents trade-offs and conundrums to U.S. policymakers, who need to ask themselves how they are to cope with the rise of China while enlisting Beijing in the effort to tame, if not bring down, the Kim dynasty. If this were not challenging enough, the United States has to simultaneously reassure (and perhaps restrain) allies who have deep conflicts with each other and important domestic divisions.

This reminds us that while many of the ideas that analysts and policymakers bring to East Asia come from the Cold War, the struggle with the Soviet Union, for all of its dangers, had a certain simplicity that is absent in East Asia. The line dividing Europe was relatively clear; opportunities for provocations were limited; NATO, for all the rivers of ink spilled in describing its perennial crisis, was quite united; the clients of the Soviet Union had little autonomy, with Cuba being a troublesome exception; and after the mid-1970s, Soviet power declined relative to the West, although many observers were slow to detect this trend.

The East Asian security complex is, well, complex. To start with, the two main U.S. adversaries, China and North Korea, are in conflict with each other, as are the two main U.S. allies, South Korea and Japan. Of course, the conflict among the adversaries is a potential point of leverage for the United States, as was true in the Cold War after the Sino-Soviet split. But as Thomas Christensen so well showed, until the United States and China had a rapprochement in 1971, the conflict among our adversaries made them "worse than monolith."¹ Of course, the parallel with the present situation is far from exact, in part because North Korea is so much smaller and less powerful than China and does not compete with it for international support. But the conflict does mean that the United States and the other states in the region cannot concentrate on one of these threats to the exclusion of the other.

China's life is also complicated by the North Korea problem. On the one hand, China may gain leverage over the United States and the region if it can get rewards for increasing pressure on its neighbor. Given its fear of a North Korea collapse and the lingering ties leftover from the Korean War, however, China may not be willing to play this card. Even if it were willing to do so, the price it would ask might be too high. The other side of this coin is even less attractive to China: the fact that Beijing is known to have the ability to pressure North Korea makes it the target of U.S. pressure. President Trump's statements to this effect have been characteristically bombastic, but his exasperation with Beijing's unwillingness to do more was shared by previous administrations. Recent developments show both promise and risk. The progress of the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, including the successful test launch of an intercontinental

¹ Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

ballistic missile (ICBM) potentially capable of reaching Alaska, brings an urgency to the situation that might prompt China to take on a larger role. Although one can imagine some scenarios in which a war between the United States and North Korea would redound to China's favor, consequences that are harmful to it seem more likely. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to South Korea, which China claims to see as a threat to its retaliatory force—a claim that is perhaps exaggerated but that represents no more than the normal degree of paranoia in international politics—would end if the North Korea threat did.

In the aftermath of World War II, Franco-German rapprochement was crucial for the defense of Europe and Western prosperity. This pattern was not to be replicated in East Asia, where South Korea and Japan maintained relations that were uneasy at best.² The Japanese were unable to fully come to grips with their mistreatment of the South Koreans, while the latter could not put this issue behind them. The United States, of course, gained some added leverage over each side, but this could not compensate for the weakness resulting from the lack of a common front when dealing with China and North Korea. That Japan first ignored and then became obsessed with the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens further complicated matters. Japan and South Korea also had their own interests in the region, and these did not always coincide with those of the United States.³

The complexities of the security environment in East Asia are unfortunately well-illustrated by the confrontation with North Korea. The standard literature follows Thomas Schelling in distinguishing between deterrence and compellence.⁴ The object of the use of threats in the former case is to convince the other side not to do something; in the latter case, the objective is to convince it to cease doing something, to change its behavior. The United States' minimum goal is to get North Korea to stop nuclear and missile tests. On the one hand, this approach can be seen as deterrence because these are tests that have not yet been carried out. On the other hand, it is probably best characterized as compellent because it demands that Kim Jong-un move off the established path of developing a usable nuclear stockpile.

The distinction between deterrence and compellence is of more than academic interest because it is generally agreed that the latter is a good deal harder than the former. Can even a well-designed coercive policy work? The difficulty of the task underlines the probable need to consider more than threats. Indeed, as Schelling stressed, threats are useless unless accompanied by appropriate promises. That is, in addition to threatening to do something unpleasant if the adversary undertakes certain actions, the state has to promise not to do so if the adversary complies. Theorists and, even more, national leaders have paid much less attention to the credibility of their promises than to the credibility of their threats. This seems particularly true of the current U.S. administration. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama were aware of the problem and tried to reassure the North that if it gave up its nuclear weapons, the United States would not seek to overthrow it. Ironically, the Trump administration's downgrading of human rights concerns and rejection of the common view that highly repressive dictatorships are almost always threats to their neighbors might make it easier for the administration to make credible promises.

² Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The U.S.-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

³ The divergences in the early years of the Cold War explain why the United States sought bilateral arrangements with these countries rather than seeking multilateral agreements, as in Europe. Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁴ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

But the president's belligerent attitude and general worldview seems to inhibit, if not block, an understanding of the need to reassure others.

A second complication is the need to work with regional allies, especially Japan and South Korea. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have traveled to these countries to carry the message that the United States will be steadfast in their defense, but it is far from clear that either country is willing to endorse the use of force or even more explicit threats. This is not surprising, given that they would be the target of any North Korean military retaliation. Furthermore, South Korea's new president, Moon Jae-in, has pledged a more "dovish" policy than that followed by the impeached government of Park Geun-hye.

These differences could make it difficult for the Trump administration to undertake steps that would increase the credibility of its threats. If the United States were really preparing to strike, it would have to plan for North Korean retaliation. The obvious move here would be to evacuate American civilians from Seoul. Doing so would increase the credibility of the U.S. threat, but it also would cause enormous unrest in South Korea.

Even negotiated solutions or arrangements could be inhibited by or exacerbate splits with U.S. allies. The obvious move in this direction, suggested by China but rejected by the United States, would be "freeze for freeze." Under this settlement, North Korea would halt its nuclear program in return for the United States and South Korea suspending their joint military maneuvers. Since North Korea does not yet have an ICBM, this would meet the United States' primary objective of keeping the U.S. homeland free from threats. But it would leave Japan and, even more, South Korea as targets. Of course, the United States could argue with much validity that keeping the U.S. homeland safe enhances the security of allies because it bolsters the credibility of the United States' threat to use force if need be to protect its friends in the region. The logic of extended deterrence is indeed impeccable, but the notion that the United States would be willing to give up the exercises with South Korea in order to protect its own homeland while leaving its allies vulnerable is not likely to sit well with them.

All this excludes the problems and opportunities of Russia's interests and the rise of China. On the one hand, these countries may help ameliorate the situation on the Korean Peninsula because they are at least indirectly threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons and so would like to broker a deal. On the other hand, having the United States be preoccupied with this threat has advantages to them. China, in particular, might be tempted to promise greater support in return for U.S. concessions on economic or geostrategic issues. Such trade-offs, undesired by any administration, seem particularly repellent to Trump. I gather that the saying "May you live in interesting times" is not really an ancient Chinese curse, but it does seem to apply here.

In these unsettlingly interesting times, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), with generous support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, has conducted a multiyear study of Asia's nuclear future. This project aims to inform a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics influencing the Asia-Pacific's current and future nuclear environment and assess the implications for U.S. strategy. Findings from the project have been published in NBR's *Strategic Asia* series, the *Asia Policy* journal, and a 2016 NBR Special Report.⁵ The essays collected in the current report build on these findings

⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2013–14: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013); Christopher P. Twomey et al., "Approaching Critical Mass: Asia's Multipolar Nuclear Future," *Asia Policy*, no. 19 (2015): 1–48; and Matthew Kroenig, "Approaching Critical Mass: Asia's Multipolar Nuclear Future," NBR, Special Report, no. 58, June 2016.

by providing assessments of Asia's emerging nuclear dynamics from U.S., Japanese, and South Korean scholars. The essays were originally presented at a private workshop in Tokyo in November 2016 and were subsequently revised to incorporate feedback from workshop participants and the project's senior advisers.

Christopher Twomey shows how complex interstate competition and strategic and military rivalries are combining to make Asia's second nuclear age unstable and prone to nuclear spirals. Michito Tsuruoka reflects on the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance of Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, while Sugio Takahashi argues that the prospect of North Korean nuclear ballistic missiles requires the United States to quantitatively and qualitatively upgrade its assurances to Japan. Jina Kim explains how North Korea's "balance of threat" strategy and advancing capabilities necessitate a more comprehensive U.S.-South Korea extended deterrence strategy. J. James Kim then probes the domestic public opinion and regional power constraints shaping South Korean policy toward the North. Finally, in a comparison with Cold War nuclear deterrence, Matthew Kroenig argues that Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo must formulate a common understanding of the threat scenarios posed by North Korea's nuclear forces, fashion a clear strategic response, and develop mechanisms for communicating that strategy to both allies and the North Korean regime. The report concludes with comments by Aaron Friedberg on the North Korean crisis and the second nuclear age.

The complex web of relations among U.S. allies and adversaries in Asia makes the lessons of the past both limiting and empowering. This NBR Special Report provides prescient and actionable analysis of Asia's nuclear dynamics at a moment when the need for such research could not be more exigent.

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The Asian Nuclear System in Comparative and Theoretical Context

Christopher Twomey

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NOTE: The author has benefited from feedback on the ideas presented in this essay from audiences at various NBR events, at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and at the American Political Science Association. Matthew Kroenig also provided valuable comments on this specific essay. This essay represents the author's personal views and does not necessarily represent the views of any part of the U.S. government.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay argues that the second nuclear age in Asia is likely to be highly dangerous and unstable based on lessons from history and implications from theory.

MAIN ARGUMENT

There are theoretical grounds for deep concerns about the nuclear arena in Asia that are borne out in preliminary evaluation of current events. What is often referred to as a second nuclear age poses many dangers in this region in particular. Some of these concerns stem from a deeper understanding of the sources of instability from the Cold War: major conflicts of interest, intense conventional rivalries, and manipulations of risk and competitions in resolve. Others draw on international relations theory to identify sources of conflict and uncertainty. Thus, traditional concerns about the dangers of multipolarity have analogues today, as does the increasing complexity in the strategic realm with the development of a wide range of new “strategic” capabilities. Today, the question of what constitutes a strategic escalation is much less clear than in the past. These problems, endemic to the contemporary global order, are particularly prominent in Asia. Intense conventional rivalries exist in a number of areas, often the product of repeated wars and militarized crises. Several states are engaging in the same sort of dangerous coercive diplomacy that was riskiest during the Cold War. States interact in polygonal relationships rather than dyadic ones (e.g., U.S.-China-Russia, India-Pakistan-China, and U.S.-China-North Korea triangles). These trends make Asia likely to be a dangerous region, and one not easily pacified by international diplomacy. Rather, tacit restraint and conservative foreign policy goals are warranted.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The outlook for Asia’s nuclear future is very negative, even in the absence of specific assertive policies by China or other countries.
- Additional efforts should be made to educate the region regarding current trends in Asia to reduce unintentional spirals.
- The U.S. should be cautious and conservative in pursuit of its regional foreign policy goals, recognizing that multipolar nuclear spirals have the potential to raise great costs.

There are grounds for deep concern in the nuclear arena in Asia stemming from a range of systemic and technological changes in strategic affairs. These nuclear problems are independent from, but worsen, challenges posed by shifting Chinese conventional power and foreign policy (i.e., suggestions of Chinese “assertiveness”).¹

This is a surprising conclusion to many experts in the field. A variety of sources suggest that nuclear weapons can be stabilizing to international politics. Kenneth Waltz famously argued this perspective in his 2003 debate with Scott Sagan.² Some scholarship in the quantitative literature has come to similar conclusions.³ A range of regional specialists have argued that at least some positive effects can be anticipated due to the recent spread of nuclear weapons in greater Asia.⁴ Finally, portions of the power-transition literature recognize that nuclear weapons had a stabilizing influence on the U.S.-Soviet rivalry as well, mitigating what might have otherwise led to a Thucydides trap.⁵

In this essay, I will argue that these reasonable extrapolations from international relations theory are wrong; instead, the second nuclear age in Asia will likely be one of great peril. The essay will begin with a summary of the more recent views regarding the role of nuclear weapons in the Cold War and relevant international relations theory. The next section will consider the relevance of this to Asia today, focusing on implications for crisis diplomacy and the importance of polygonal relationships in the second nuclear age. Finally, concluding thoughts and policy implications are offered.

Historical and Theoretical Reasons for Concern

Before discussing the core characteristics of the second nuclear age in Asia, it is worth emphasizing that the traditional narrative of the Cold War as a “long peace” with relative stability is too idealized.⁶ Work based on detailed assessments of both sides’ declassified materials has made clear that key crises in the Cold War were far more dangerous than was originally portrayed. Tactical weapons were deployed under local control during the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁷ The Able Archer alert in 1983 was viewed as preliminary mobilization for actual war by the Soviet Union.⁸ Indeed, much of what we now understand about the crises in the Cold War suggests that there was less stability throughout the period than the term “long peace” suggests.⁹

Although nuclear weapons may not have been the central drivers of the Cold War—competing national interests were far more important—these weapons certainly heightened dangers

¹ For a discussion of Chinese assertiveness, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7–48.

² Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

³ See Michael Horowitz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons and International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009): 234–57; and Robert Rauchhaus, “Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009): 258–77.

⁴ Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, “The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest,” *International Security* 39, no. 1 (2014): 7–43.

⁵ Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756>.

⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁷ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

⁸ Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: New Press, 2016).

⁹ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

during crises. The conflict in national interests posed stark dangers of intense conventional conflict, which would have taken place under the nuclear shadow.¹⁰ Numerous crises erupted and progressed through competitions of resolve and risk-taking, as Thomas Schelling had predicted.¹¹ Arms races were driven by both external and internal factors, making their resolution all the more challenging.

Before drawing any contrasts with this earlier—and still quite dangerous—period, some continuities should be acknowledged in Asia today. First, some interactions in the Cold War involved more than two actors with strategic forces.¹² For example, nuclear signaling occurred in the 1969 Sino-Soviet war, with the United States as an interested party in the development of that conflict.¹³ The Suez Crisis occurred after the United Kingdom had developed a nascent arsenal. And the 1973 Arab-Israeli war also involved more than two nuclear players as a result of U.S.-Soviet involvement.¹⁴ Second, the contemporary concept of “rogue states” had an analogue as well: China was treated as such when it began to develop its arsenal in the 1960s.¹⁵

Nevertheless, a number of important differences exist.¹⁶ During the Cold War, nearly everyone would have agreed that the most important strategic dyadic interactions were those between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, a huge range of possible “most important” relationships exist: India-Pakistan, United States–North Korea, United States–Russia, United States–China, and Israel-Iran, among others. A second major shift is that today missile defense systems and precision-guided munitions are capable of affecting the strategic balance. That was not the case in the Cold War, even though they began to appear in the 1970s. Related to this, diversification of the strategic space, cyber, and space issues poses new challenges as well.¹⁷

Some of these changes have clear implications when viewed through the lens of international relations theory. While nuclear and strategic interactions do have notable differences from the conventional conflicts that dominated the history from which we generally derive our understandings, important lessons nevertheless endure across those different kinds of conflicts.¹⁸ Traditional international relations theory emphasizes the dangers that come from multipolarity in general.¹⁹ The core mechanism for this is the dangers posed by shifting alliances and misperceptions about their durability. For nuclear weapons, the accumulation of power across

¹⁰ Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft*.

¹¹ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), chap. 3.

¹² Rajesh Basrur develops this and other points highlighted here, as does Francis Gavin. See Rajesh Basrur, “Nuclear Stability and Polarity in Post-Cold War Asia,” *Asia Policy*, no. 19 (2015): 5–13; and Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft*.

¹³ Michael S. Gerson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969,” CNA, November 2010, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/D0022974.A2.pdf.

¹⁴ Elbridge Colby et al., “The Israeli Nuclear Alert of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis,” CNA, April 2013.

¹⁵ William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson. “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000/2001): 54–99.

¹⁶ Valuable assessments of the second nuclear age highlighting these and related topics include Matthew Kroenig, “Approaching Critical Mass: Asia’s Multipolar Nuclear Future,” National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), Special Report, June 2016; “Approaching Critical Mass: Asia’s Multipolar Nuclear Future,” *Asia Policy*, no. 19 (2015): 1–48; and Christopher P. Twomey, “Asia’s Complex Strategic Environment: Nuclear Multipolarity and Other Dangers,” *Asia Policy*, no. 11 (2011): 51–78.

¹⁷ Paul Bracken, “The Cyber Threat to Nuclear Stability,” *Orbis* 60, no. 2 (2016): 188–203. While space was certainly a domain of strategic interest and competition during the Cold War, bilateral norms developed by the latter period and technological limitations constrained competition. See James Clay Moltz, *The Politics of Space Security: Strategic Restraint and the Pursuit of National Interests* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). That is no longer the case, particularly in Asia. See James Clay Moltz, *Asia’s Space Race: National Motivations, Regional Rivalries, and International Risks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ On other reasons to broaden traditional international relations theory, see David C. Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 57–85.

¹⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

states is challenging.²⁰ During the Cold War, the addition of French, Chinese, or British weapons to the capabilities possessed by the two superpowers would have changed the power balance only marginally. (Indeed, while the shift of China from one side of the Cold War to the other had tremendous effect on the conventional balance, it made little difference to the strategic nuclear rivalry.)²¹ On the other hand, the addition of U.S. capabilities to the capabilities of smaller allies mattered significantly. Thus, one critical issue for traditional (conventional warfare-dominated) international relations theory regarding multipolarity—the potential for rapid shifts in the balance of power—maps imperfectly in an era characterized by nuclear multipolarity.

Nevertheless, a related concern is exacerbated in the current circumstances. Within allied relationships, there is a recognized tension between abandonment and entrapment.²² Multipolarity exacerbates this “alliance dilemma.”²³ States must manage this situation by alternately tightening or loosening the ties within the alliance (e.g., through closer coordination of forces or forward deployment of tripwire forces, among other options). This is the key challenge of managing credible extended-deterrence relationships while reining in allies. It is a major problem within multipolarity, and indeed is a core element of dangers that stem from it.²⁴

Finally, facing multiple distinct threats stresses the strategic calculations of actors. The canonical example of this was Germany’s Schlieffen plan, designed to deal with dangerous adversaries on both its eastern and western front in 1914.²⁵ John Mearsheimer talks about related issues in his discussion of bloodletting and bait-and-bleed strategies, while Geoffrey Blainey discusses similar factors.²⁶ These factors also apply in the nuclear arena. Were the United States to engage in a nuclear conflict with China tomorrow, it would need to hold a sizable portion of its arsenal in reserve to deter possible Russian aggression.

A more general formulation of this looks at conflicts consisting of “truels” rather than duels. The stable, iterated solutions that Robert Axelrod discusses as avoiding worst-case outcomes in his classic book *The Evolution of Cooperation* disintegrate with three players involved in such “prisoner’s dilemma” stylized conflicts.²⁷ The core issues of uncertainty, the lack of transparency, and relative simultaneity—long thought relevant to nuclear affairs as well—erode any possibility of stable theoretical outcomes.

Asia is characterized by multiple nuclear actors and other strategic players wrapped up in an increasingly intense interaction.²⁸ China, the United States, North Korea, Russia, India,

²⁰ Indeed, the importance of quantitative advantage is one of the points of debate between Matthew Furmann and Matthew Kroenig; so too is the way in which to treat allies’ nuclear holdings. For a good discussion of these and related issues, see “What We Talk about When We Talk about Nuclear Weapons,” H-Diplo, International Security Studies Forum, no. 2, 2014, available at networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/31776/h-diploissf-forum-what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-nuclear.

²¹ See James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

²² Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 3 (1984): 461–95. Note that some analysts use the term “chain ganging” to capture the phenomenon referred to here as entrapment.

²³ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (1990): 137–68.

²⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

²⁵ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

²⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 5; and Geoffrey Blainey, “While Waterbirds Fight,” in *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), chap. 4.

²⁷ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and D.M. Kilgour and Steven J. Brams, “The Truel,” *Mathematics Magazine* 70, no. 5 (1997): 315–26.

²⁸ In addition to the works cited in footnote 17, see Linton Brooks and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Extended Deterrence, Assurance, and Reassurance in the Pacific during the Second Nuclear Age,” in *Strategic Asia 2013–14: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner (Seattle: NBR, 2013); and Paul Bracken, “Rethinking Conflict: Asia’s Emerging ‘Pentapolar’ Nuclear System,” *Global Asia* 11, no. 3 (2016): 30–35.

Pakistan, Japan, and South Korea all look at more than one regional player as they frame their security policies. Detailed sketches of some of these interactions will be provided in the next section. Although the arsenals of these players vary considerably, the mere possession of nuclear weapons conveys significant geostrategic advantage (as validated by the attention paid to the distinction between nuclear “haves” and “have-nots”).

Systemic complexity is also widely recognized to cause challenges to stability and predictability. As the nature and intensity of types of connections between units increases, the complexity of a system does so as well. In such cases, it becomes all the more important to study the system rather than the attributes of specific actors.²⁹ This leads to a great reduction in predictability in general and a complication of signaling and communication across actors.³⁰

Again, in Asia today, such systemic complexity exists in strategic rivalry. There are vast asymmetries in arsenal size. Actors think about the utility of nuclear weapons in significantly different ways as well: for example, North Korea believes that it secures a coercive advantage from a trivial arsenal, whereas the United States believes that highly credible forces in massive numbers primarily have deterrent value.³¹

Additionally, in the contemporary technological environment, with the development of capable missile defense systems, strategic competition moves into a second dimension in a significant fashion. While space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets have long been part of the strategic landscape, with the proliferation of actors who derive less benefit from space—and therefore who are less reluctant to regard it as a sanctuary—that domain threatens to become a new battleground as well. Advanced precision strike with conventional weapons also allows states to achieve strategic effects with conventional weapons in cases that might have previously required crossing the nuclear threshold.³² Finally, cyberspace poses a dynamic set of complexities.³³ As information technology plays an ever-increasing role in nearly all aspects of society, critical infrastructure can be targeted with cyberweapons, creating strategic effects without kinetic attack. Further, the dependence of modern military operations on information networks creates powerful capabilities but also new vulnerabilities.

One negative implication of this contemporary strategic complexity concerns the blurring of the clear, bright red line of escalation into the strategic realm. During the Cold War, it was reasonable to think about nuclear escalation as crossing a very distinct red line. Use of nuclear weapons anywhere, of any size, would cross a clear, salient threshold.³⁴ Debates raged about the potential to manage escalation within a nuclear war, but that issue posed distinct challenges from solely conventional war. Attacking so-called national technical means of generally space-based surveillance created the sparest example of a blurring of this clear line. As these nontechnical

²⁹ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960). Indeed, such an emphasis on “systems” certainly appeals to Waltz, who noted the effects that even simple systems can have in dominating the preferences of individual actors. Deep complexity only makes the situation worse. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

³⁰ Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Difference and Deterrence Failure in Sino-American Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

³¹ For more on the range of possible strategies, see Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³² Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, “Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1–2 (2015): 38–73.

³³ Bracken, “The Cyber Threat to Nuclear Stability”; and Jon R. Lindsay, “Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare,” *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 365–404.

³⁴ On the importance of such thresholds, see the discussion of focal points in Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 57.

means were relatively well understood by the two symmetrical powers (and indeed were codified in treaties), they posed relatively smaller risks.³⁵

The question of what constitutes strategic escalation is much less clear today. If there was a single distinct red line in the Cold War, we now have a tangled ball of red yarn. Which of the following represents a strategic escalation: a conventional precision-guided munition attack on a nuclear weapon; an attack on dual-use communication satellites that carry military communications; an attack on land-based over-the-horizon radars; an attack on ballistic missile defense systems (radars or interceptor platforms); a cyberattack on civilian infrastructure, such as nuclear power stations, dams, or electricity grids, that might threaten thousands of lives? The answers to these questions are much less clear.

Application to Asia

Thus far, this discussion for the most part has focused on generic changes in the second nuclear age. However, each of these factors manifests with particular intensity in Asia.

Challenges to Crisis Diplomacy

As discussed above, a core issue in the Cold War was the potential for intense conventional crises. Today, three dyads in Asia possess the potential for such conflict given severe threat perceptions. North Korea exhibits both fears for its own survival and an irrationality about the utility of crisis promotion for fomenting nationalism. Both North and South Korea are highly militarized, with frequent incidents occurring between them. Second, the Indo-Pakistan dyad centers on disputed territory and unsettled issues of state formation. Here, full-scale wars in 1965, 1971, and 1999, as well as smaller incidents in 2011 and 2016, attest to the volatility of this dyad. Finally, China's view of Taiwan as lost territory threatens to return as a security issue as domestic trends in both polities move in divergent directions.³⁶ All of these relationships seem analogous to the scale of contestation during the Cold War (indeed, two stem from the Cold War).

For both reasons of nationalism and realist security concerns, the Sino-Japanese relationship has the potential to raise similar challenges. These might flare up over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. More broadly, however, these challenges concern the place of both China and Japan in the international order of East Asia, where China is a newly risen great power, and Japan is a power still defining what its "normal" foreign policy is in the wake of its twentieth-century militarism. Thus, the backdrop of high-intensity conventional rivalry driven by fundamental conflicts of interest suggests that substantial grounds exist for an intense and dangerous nuclear rivalry to develop.

A second lesson from the Cold War is that competitions of resolve and deliberate manipulation or risk are particularly dangerous. Today in Asia, both North Korea and Pakistan have pursued policies aimed at affecting their adversaries' perceptions of risk in a conflict. The potential for the United States and China to engage in competitions of resolve over Taiwan is

³⁵ Moltz, *The Politics of Space Security*.

³⁶ "The Great Obfuscation of One-China," *Economist*, March 11, 2017; and Derek Grossman, Sheryn Lee, Benjamin Schreer, and Scott L. Kastner, "Correspondence: Stability or Volatility across the Taiwan Strait?" *International Security* 41, no. 2 (2016): 192–97.

also significant.³⁷ Indeed, some might argue that the two are already doing so in conventional terms in the South China Sea.³⁸

Polygons of Strategic Interaction

In addition to dangerous analogues from the Cold War history of nuclear rivalry, contemporary Asia is plagued with a more complex strategic geometry. **Figure 1** highlights some of these interactions.

A few polygons are shown and some of them are worth discussing for illustrative purposes. The clearest interactive triangle involves China, India, and Pakistan. Indian threat perceptions of Pakistan are long-standing, based on a history of war and militarized border incidents. Pakistan certainly has significant concerns regarding India, and there are emerging signs of Chinese threat perceptions regarding India as well. This shows up in selective writings as well as in the deployment pattern of the DF-21 nuclear intermediate-range ballistic missile.³⁹ There are alliance-like elements in the China-Pakistan relationship. (For example, beyond the history of Chinese support for Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs, Chinese troops marched in a military parade in Islamabad in 2017.) This is certainly a loose alignment, but it will nevertheless pose traditional abandonment-entrapment concerns as security tensions for Pakistan intensify. More specifically in the nuclear arena, there are already triangular interactions occurring. As India seeks out ways to respond to Pakistan's lowering of the nuclear threshold by planning the forward deployment of tactical weapons, it has taken steps that suggest to some an abandonment of its no-first-use policy.⁴⁰ This, in turn, will raise questions for China about India's strategic trajectory given Indian conventional inferiority relative to China.

Another triangle involves the United States, China, and Russia, albeit with one side being rather weakly interactive at the present time. Russia and China do not seem to have significant threat perceptions regarding each other, and the two are not engaged in any perceptible arms race. Neither are they allies, so no significant alliance dilemma exists. Nevertheless, a few interesting interactions have occurred. First, Russia has deployed a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine to the Pacific for the first time in decades, while China has modernized inland DF-21 sites before those facing its maritime adversaries.⁴¹ More fundamentally, however, the two countries interact in precluding further global arms control. While U.S.-Russian arms control may well be on hold for a variety of reasons, one that predates the Ukraine crisis and Russia's seizure of Crimea is the requirement by both Washington and Moscow that Beijing be involved in some way in any future drawdowns. To date, Beijing has been unwilling to consider such engagements.⁴²

³⁷ Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (2002): 48–85.

³⁸ Patrick M. Cronin, "Power and Order in the South China Sea," Center for a New American Security, November 2016; and Andrew S. Erickson, "America's Security Role in the South China Sea," testimony before a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, July 23, 2015.

³⁹ Hans Kristensen, "Extensive Nuclear Missile Deployment Area Discovered in Central China," Federation of American Scientists, Strategic Security (web log), May 15, 2008, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2008/05/extensive-nuclear-deployment-area-discovered-in-central-china>.

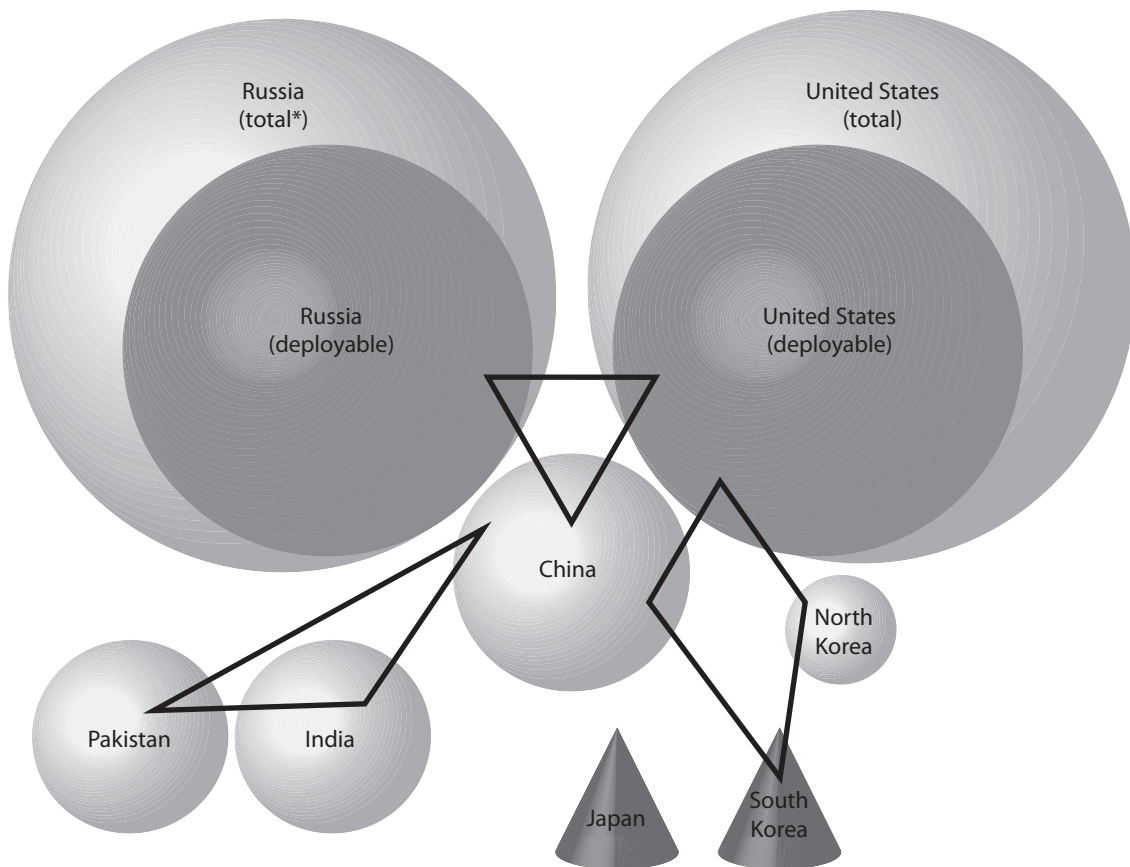
⁴⁰ Vipin Narang, among other sources, sparked some media attention to this issue in his comments at the plenary session of the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, entitled "Beyond the Nuclear Threshold: Causes and Consequences of First Use" (Washington, D.C., March 20, 2017). See also Max Fisher, "India, Long at Odds with Pakistan, May Be Rethinking Nuclear First Strikes," *New York Times*, March 31, 2017.

⁴¹ Kristensen, "Extensive Nuclear Missile Deployment Area Discovered in Central China."

⁴² At times Chinese interlocutors have highlighted the absence of India (and other countries) in such a discussion as an impediment to progress, suggesting a dimension of quadrilateral interaction.

Finally, the Korean Peninsula exhibits very interesting and disturbing dynamics. The basic relationship is a two-sided triangle, with important interaction between, first, the United States and North Korea and, second, the United States and China. China and North Korea have a loose alignment: a treaty that exists on paper only, but is based on some degree of shared interest in the viability of an independent North Korean state. But what is most distinct are the chain reactions occurring across and beyond this triangle. Repeated North Korean nuclear and missile tests have led to a variety of U.S. (and South Korean) responses. Most notable among them has been the further

FIGURE 1 Asia's strategic geometry



SOURCE: Data is from the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, various issues. The format is inspired by and adapted from Gregory D. Koblentz, *Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2014).

NOTE: Asterisk indicates that Russian total arsenal excludes “tactical” warheads. Each nuclear weapons state is represented as a sphere of proportionate volume to its arsenal. The cones represent the non-nuclear states that are involved in strategic dynamics. There seems to be some merit in using volume rather than area (or even a one-dimensional column), given the argument that mere possession of nuclear weapons provides significant capabilities aside from the nuance of relative arsenal size. (For an opposing view, see Matthew Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve? Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” *International Organizations* 67, no. 1 (2013): 141–71.) Three-dimensional spheres dampen the contrast in arsenal sizes.

deployment of U.S. missile defense assets in the region—X-band radar in Japan, coproduction of SM-3 block IIA interceptors with Japan, and most recently, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. China, the unintended target, has responded to these developments in a variety of ways, ranging from political rhetoric to quantitative increases in warheads, adapting missiles into multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV), and the nascent deployment of its own ballistic missile defense system. This sort of multiplayer spiral poses distinct problems from those encountered during the Cold War.

Indeed, the degree of predictability in such a complex multipolar environment is exceedingly low. That aforementioned Chinese missile defense system has no strategic value in any Sino-U.S. conflict: the U.S. arsenal would simply dwarf it. However, it is relevant to the Sino-Indian rivalry given India's much smaller intercontinental ballistic missile force that might be used to deter China in a conflict. Thus, at least in part, North Korea's nuclear program prompted the United States to enhance its missile defense capabilities in Asia, which led China to accelerate its own missile defenses, which, in turn, has raised concerns for India. It seems highly improbable that anyone would have predicted that a North Korean nuclear weapons test would threaten the credibility of Indian nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis China!

Conclusions

Generally, this essay has presented very negative findings about Asia's nuclear future. Historical and theoretical grounds suggest that strategic instability will be rife in Asia's second nuclear age. Dangerous interactions across multiple players in different configurations will be exacerbated by the multidimensionality in areas of technical and military competition.

Beyond abject pessimism, what are the policy implications? First, we should recognize that this pessimism comes about aside from any partially assertive set of Chinese policies (toward the South China Sea, East China Sea, or Taiwan). If China indeed shifts to a more expansionary pursuit of its security interests in the region, the potential for escalatory crises will be even higher.

Second, efforts should be made to educate China, which sits at the center of many of these polygons, as well as the rest of the region, about these dangers. As a result of open discussions on these sensitive topics, a history of strategic analysis of related issues for seven decades, and the U.S. experience in the Cold War, in the United States there is a deeper degree of engagement with these issues outside the government than in nearly any other country in the Asia-Pacific. China's strategic analytic community is particularly constrained by both its small size and the imperatives of self-censorship in an authoritarian society. Further engagement with security thinkers across the region can have some constructive effects.

Finally, the United States should be cautious and conservative in its regional foreign policy goals. Vigorous pursuit of anything other than vital interests will provide further impetus for others to react, and their reactions will have secondary and tertiary effects that may undermine U.S. interests. The United States should look for opportunities for tacit restraint. Less active pursuit of secondary interests may be required to avoid spawning potential spin-on trilateral or quadrilateral spirals that might leave the United States worse off in the end.

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Japan's New Nuclear Deterrence Challenges: The Implications of Russia's Nuclear Saber-Rattling and NATO's Response

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance of Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and NATO's response.

MAIN ARGUMENT

While not widely discussed in Japan's foreign and security policy community, several aspects of Russian policy could have far-reaching implications for Japanese security. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling is on the rise, and the role of nuclear weapons seems to be expanding in the country's military strategy. Additionally, the relationship between NATO and Russia is increasingly contentious, and NATO's nuclear message to Russia has been reinforced. For the purpose of maintaining and strengthening the deterrence and defense posture of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Tokyo cannot afford to be indifferent to those developments.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- In light of nuclear and ballistic missile threats from North Korea, as well as China's assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, Tokyo needs to work with Washington to strengthen the deterrence posture of the U.S.-Japan alliance.
- As long as Russia maintains its nuclear forces in the part of the country bordering Northeast Asia, Japan needs to thoroughly examine the impacts—both direct and indirect—of Russia's nuclear saber-rattling, which has become intense in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.
- The strengthened nuclear message to Russia from the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016 shows possible paths that the U.S.-Japan alliance could contemplate in terms of enhancing its own language on extended nuclear deterrence, despite the fact that the regional contexts in Europe and Asia are vastly different.

While not widely discussed in Japan's foreign and security policy community, several aspects of Russian policy and the response by NATO could have far-reaching implications for Japanese security. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling is on the rise, and the role of nuclear weapons seems to be expanding in the country's military strategy. Additionally, the relationship between NATO and Russia is increasingly contentious.

As the debates on intermediate-range nuclear forces in the 1980s showed, Japan has long viewed the Soviet Union's and subsequently Russia's nuclear arsenal as a factor in its security and defense policymaking. During these debates, the government led by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone pushed hard for a "global zero" option over a "Europe zero" option. Tokyo feared that the latter would lead to a situation where Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces were transferred to the country's Asian front, thereby threatening Japan.¹ A similar security concern was raised in Japan more than a quarter century later when NATO's Strategic Concept of November 2010 called for Russia to "relocate" its tactical nuclear weapons "away from the territory of NATO members."² Today's challenges are no less demanding.

The main purpose of this essay is to examine the impacts on Japan—both present and potential and both direct and indirect—of Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in the wake of the Ukraine crisis starting in 2014 and NATO's response to it. The discussion of the latter issue will encompass recent U.S. debates on the possible limited use of nuclear weapons by its adversaries—Russia mainly, but also to a lesser extent China. After all, these developments present a new set of deterrence-related challenges for Tokyo.

The way in which the United States, Japan's only formal ally, addresses these nuclear challenges in terms of both deterring Russia and reassuring its European allies has significant implications for Japan, especially in light of what has been taking place in the region. First, in terms of maintaining the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence to Japan, Tokyo would like to see the United States maintain a strong posture in other parts of the world, as a decline of U.S. credibility in one region could cause a domino effect in other regions. A second, somewhat contradictory concern is that if the United States is bogged down in Europe or the Middle East, Washington most likely would have fewer resources to devote to Asia. After all, the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia was based on the assumption that the U.S. burden in the Middle East was about to decrease and the perception that Europe was at peace. The pivot to Asia became possible only under such circumstances. From this viewpoint, the refocus of the United States on Europe is a cause for concern for Japan. In a sense, U.S. allies and partners in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East are competing for U.S. resources, though the situation is of course far from a simple zero-sum game.³ Third, related to the above considerations, regardless of the degree to which U.S.-Russia relations or NATO-Russia relations directly affect Japan's security interests, the climate and trends of strategic discourse in the United States are always something that Tokyo needs to follow closely.

¹ See, for example, Kusano Atsushi, "Nakasone Yasuhiro: The Appearance of a Presidential Prime Minister," in *The Prime Ministers of Postwar Japan, 1945–1995: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Watanabe Akio (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 280–81. On the need to compare NATO's and Japan's approaches to nuclear deterrence more broadly, see Michito Tsuruoka, "Why the NATO Nuclear Debate Is Relevant to Japan and Vice Versa," German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy Brief, October 2010; and Michito Tsuruoka, "The NATO vs. East Asian Models of Extended Nuclear Deterrence? Seeking a Synergy beyond Dichotomy," *Asian Forum* 5, no. 3 (2017).

² "Active Engagement, Modern Defence," NATO, November 19, 2010, par. 26, http://www.nato.int/cps/po/natohq/official_texts_68580.htm; and Michito Tsuruoka, "Relocating Tactical Nuclear Weapons? A View from Japan," Tokyo Foundation, May 30, 2011, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2011/tactical-nuclear-weapons>.

³ See, for example, Michito Tsuruoka, "NATO's Challenges as Seen from Asia: Is the European Security Landscape Becoming Like Asia?" *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2016): 124–33.

The first section of this essay examines Russia's nuclear saber-rattling from a Japanese viewpoint, particularly regarding why the level of attention to this development in Tokyo remains low and how the potential impact could be greater than expected. The second section focuses on what NATO's evolving nuclear posture, as shown in the communiqué adopted at the Warsaw summit in July 2016, means for Japan and the deterrence posture of the U.S.-Japan alliance. One of the most important questions that Japan faces in this regard is whether the current language about nuclear deterrence in the U.S.-Japan alliance is still appropriate given the worsening security situation surrounding Japan, including North Korea's series of nuclear provocations and China's nuclear modernization.

The Implications of Russia's Nuclear Saber-Rattling for Japan

Japanese Indifference

Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in the wake of the Ukraine crisis has been well documented.⁴ While the focus has predominantly been on the European theater, it is impossible to deny the global impact of this development, not least because of the fact that a significant part of Russia's nuclear arsenal is deployed in Asia. As for nonstrategic (tactical or short-range) nuclear weapons, the main target has always been believed to be China as well as NATO countries.⁵ One of the major reasons that Russia cannot afford to reduce the number of such weapons is that it would be unable to match Chinese forces in quantitative terms in the conventional domain in the Far East.

However, the level of attention to Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in Tokyo remains low and the government has so far refrained from expressing concern, which can be explained in three ways. First, one can argue that Russia's use of nuclear weapons in Asia, particularly against Japan, looks less plausible. While the Japanese public's perceptions of Russia have been consistently negative for historical reasons, this by no means suggests that the country is seen as a military threat. Despite Russia's increasingly active military behavior in the vicinity of Japan, officials and Self-Defense Force officers often argue that Russia is more predictable and more in line with international standards than China. Opinion polls also confirm this attitude. Although a similarly high percentage of Japanese people have unfavorable views of China (80.5%) and Russia (76.9%), more people regard the relationship with Russia as good or somewhat good (27.8%) than the relationship with China (12.5%), according to a December 2016 poll by the Japanese government.⁶

Second, Tokyo's seeming indifference to Russia's nuclear saber-rattling is arguably the result of a conscious decision by the government to not take any actions that could adversely affect the overall political climate of the bilateral relationship. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government have been committed to improving relations with Moscow, primarily in an effort to resolve the territorial dispute between the two countries. This process started before the

⁴ See, for example, Jacek Durkalec, "Nuclear-Backed 'Little Green Men': Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis," Polish Institute of International Affairs, Report, July 2015.

⁵ See, for example, Simon Saradzhyan, "Russia's Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons in Their Current Configuration and Posture: A Strategic Asset or Liability?" Harvard University, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, January 2010; and David Yost, "Russia's Non-strategic Nuclear Forces," *International Affairs* 77, no. 3 (2001): 531–51.

⁶ "Overview of the Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy," Public Relations Office, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, December 2016, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h28/h28-gaiko/summary.pdf>.

Ukraine crisis. The dispute is over the four islands—called the Northern Territories in Japan and the Kuril Islands in Russia—that the Soviet Union occupied in the final days of World War II. Abe is committed to recovering the islands from Russia and has made overtures to Moscow, including by cultivating a personal relationship with President Vladimir Putin. In short, Abe does not want to let the tensions between Russia and the West damage this effort too much.⁷

This move is also based on a strategic calculation. Japan sees Russia as a strategic player in the context of the “increasingly severe security environment surrounding the country,” particularly as a result of China’s aggressive actions in the maritime domain.⁸ While not attempting to use Russia as a counterweight against China, Japan needs to prevent the two countries from getting too close and posing a united front on historical and territorial issues. For this purpose, Tokyo believes that it is not in Japan’s interest to corner Russia—maintaining good relations is seen as the preferred option. This also explains why Tokyo did not criticize Russia’s campaign in Syria, which some Western leaders condemned as a war crime. The Abe government, for example, did not join a statement signed by the other group of seven (G-7) countries in December 2016, just a week before Putin’s visit to Japan, that included critical words on Russia’s actions in Aleppo.⁹

A third reason that the level of awareness about Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling remains low in Japan has to do with the preoccupation in Japanese security and defense thinking with low-intensity—what Tokyo calls “gray zone”—contingencies. This perception is largely shaped by the increasing challenge posed by China in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands. As a result, Japan’s overall attention to high-end and high-intensity issues has declined substantially in recent years. The fact that China has consistently modernized its nuclear arsenal and remains the only nuclear weapons state recognized by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that keeps increasing the number of its nuclear warheads is often overlooked. While there are numerous China experts in Japan, very few specialize in China’s nuclear weapons and strategy. Russia, on the other hand, is not usually seen as a military threat in Japan and is to a large extent overshadowed by China and North Korea in Japanese discourse on security threats facing the country. This partly reflects the fact that Russia’s behavior in Asia has been less aggressive than in the Middle East and Europe.

Reasons for Concern

Moscow’s nuclear saber-rattling should be of concern to Tokyo. Russia’s actions contradict what Japan believes in and potentially affect Japanese security more than is usually appreciated, suggesting that Tokyo needs to pay more attention to the problem.

First, as the only country in the world that has suffered a nuclear attack, Japan has a unique sentiment about nuclear weapons. The overt threat to use nuclear weapons—by any country—should be something that Japan opposes as a matter of principle. There is a debate over whether Russia actually has adopted a strategy of “escalation to de-escalate”—that is, the

⁷ Michito Tsuruoka, “Strategic Considerations in Japan-Russia Relations: The Rise of China and the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” in “Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente: The Future of Major-Power Relations in Northeast Asia,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report, April 2017, 11–20.

⁸ Government of Japan, “National Security Strategy,” December 17, 2013, par. 3 (4).

⁹ “Joint Statement from the Leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States on the Situation in Aleppo (Syria),” Prime Minister of Canada, December 7, 2016, <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2016/12/08/joint-statement-leaders-canada-france-germany-italy-united-kingdom-and-united-states>.

early limited use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts.¹⁰ Concerns about this possibility have been raised primarily in the context of Europe, given that Russia's nuclear saber-rattling has predominantly been directed at NATO. Nonetheless, Japan cannot be indifferent to such a problem inasmuch as Russian nuclear weapons are also deployed in the far eastern part of the country. Tokyo needs to thoroughly examine the circumstances under which Moscow might contemplate the use of nuclear weapons—particularly the de-escalatory use—not because this scenario is probable but because it would bring serious consequences for Japan. The problem is that Japan does not seem to have any viable means to counter the limited use of nuclear weapons. In terms of addressing such nuclear threats, the U.S. nuclear deterrent is vital for Japan.¹¹

Second, Russia increased its military activities following the Ukraine crisis in 2014, resulting in a sharp rise in the number of fighter jet scrambles against Russian aircraft in the vicinity of Japanese airspace.¹² A wide variety of Russian aircraft have been involved, including Tu-95 strategic bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Such activity can be seen as nuclear signaling, though Russia's intentions in the Far East remain unclear compared with its intentions in the European theater.

Third, Russia's nuclear saber-rattling and intimidation could undermine the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence to Japan—or more precisely, this behavior could erode the foundation on which the credibility of deterrence is based. One of the consequences of Russia's increasingly assertive nuclear posture—in terms of both rhetoric and concrete actions like exercises—seems to be the United States' declining confidence in its own capability to deter and counter Russia in the nuclear domain. The notion of limited nuclear war has returned to the center stage of the U.S. discourse on nuclear weapons, where it is often argued that the United States is ill-prepared for such a conflict in terms of both political preparedness and capabilities.¹³

Regarding capabilities, there are concerns in some quarters that the United States lacks credible nonstrategic nuclear options that could be employed to counter Russia's limited use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.¹⁴ The United States maintains around two hundred tactical nuclear weapons in select NATO countries in Europe, but all of them are outdated free-fall bombs (B61), which are not considered a practical option against Russia. Therefore, some experts argue that the United States needs to rely on a new delivery means, most notably air-launched nuclear cruise missiles, to deter and counter Russia without using intercontinental or submarine-launched ballistic missiles.¹⁵ There is indeed a growing realization that a significant capability gap exists between the United States and Russia with respect to Russia's posture and the options the United States has at its disposal. These are all strategically sound debates in which officials, experts, and political leaders ought to engage.

¹⁰ See, for example, Elbridge Colby, "Russia's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine and Its Implications," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, January 12, 2016; Mark Schneider, "Escalate to De-escalate," *Proceedings*, February 2017; Nikolai Sokov, "Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-escalation,'" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014; and Olga Oliker, "No, Russia Isn't Trying to Make Nuclear War Easier," *National Interest*, May 23, 2016.

¹¹ For further discussion of this problem, including the evolution of Japan's thinking on extended deterrence, see National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2011* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2011), chap. 8.

¹² See "Statistics on Scrambles up to the Third Quarter of FY2015," Ministry of Defense Joint Staff (Japan), Press Release, January 22, 2016, http://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2016/press_pdf/p20160122_02.pdf.

¹³ See, for example, Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ For an informative debate on this issue, see Matthew Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War," *Survival* 57, no. 1 (2015): 49–70; and Steven Pifer et al., "Forum: NATO and Russia," *Survival* 57, no. 2 (2015): 119–44.

¹⁵ Matthew Kroenig, "Toward a More Flexible NATO Nuclear Posture," Atlantic Council, Issue Brief, November 2016.

Beyond the issue of material capability, the level of integration of the conventional and nuclear components in NATO's deterrence and defense planning also must be examined in terms of dealing with the threat from Russia, which is believed to possess a highly integrated nuclear-conventional posture.¹⁶ This is not to suggest that NATO should mirror Russia's posture, but rather that the gap between conventional and nuclear planning could be bridged.¹⁷

At the same time, deterrence is about psychology as much as capabilities. When the United States is less confident in its ability to deter Russia (and for that matter China, albeit to a lesser degree), allies' confidence in U.S. extended deterrence could also be weakened. How can allies remain confident when the United States questions its own deterrent? This is yet another reason that Japan and other U.S. allies—in both Europe and Asia—need to closely follow U.S. nuclear debates. The level of anxiety that Americans have about their own nuclear deterrent could affect the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.

What NATO's New Nuclear Rhetoric Means for Japan

Fearing that its response could escalate the situation and being ill-prepared for a scenario of heightened nuclear tension, NATO initially was reluctant to respond to Russia's nuclear saber-rattling. Therefore, the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, which was held approximately six months after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, was conspicuously silent on Russia's nuclear adventurism. The summit did not mention nuclear saber-rattling in the context of the Ukraine crisis, nor did it discuss the Ukraine crisis in the context of nuclear issues. This was no accident: there was simply no consensus on how to deal with this matter given the political sensitivities of many allies regarding nuclear weapons.¹⁸ In the wake of the summit, however, NATO countries came to realize that the lack of a rigorous response could encourage Russian escalation rather than prevent it. As a result, at the summit in Warsaw in July 2016, NATO issued strong language on Russia's "irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric, military concept and underlying posture."¹⁹ The statement sent a clear message to Russia.

The Warsaw communiqué reiterated the role of nuclear weapons, including those possessed by the United Kingdom and France and U.S. warheads stationed in Europe. It went on to warn Russia, particularly challenging the alleged concept of "de-escalatory use of nuclear weapons," by stating that "any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict." The statement further reiterated that "if the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened....NATO has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that an adversary could hope to achieve."²⁰ The language employed sounds like Cold War rhetoric, demonstrating the seriousness that NATO attaches to the danger of allowing Russia's "irresponsible and aggressive" behavior to continue.

¹⁶ See, for example, Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival* 58, no. 4 (2016): 7–26; and Colby, "Russia's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine."

¹⁷ Fabrice Pothier and Alexander Vershbow, *NATO and Trump: The Case for a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2017), 10.

¹⁸ Jeffrey A. Larsen, "The Wales Summit and NATO's Deterrence Capabilities: An Assessment," NATO Defense College, Research Report, November 2014, 3–6.

¹⁹ "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," NATO, July 9, 2016, par. 10, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 54.

While the Warsaw communiqué's language about nuclear deterrence did not attract much attention in Japan—for the sake of fairness, it should be noted that this issue did not receive much attention in NATO countries either—it represented a significant shift in NATO's nuclear posture.²¹ How this language will be translated into concrete actions, including the development of new capabilities, is an issue that NATO nations need to address through a new round of nuclear debates.²² Yet this rhetorical return to Cold War language also raises questions for Japan in addressing its own nuclear challenges in the region.

First, though Russia's behavior may be less assertive in Asia than in Europe or the Middle East, the world's most unpredictable country that possesses nuclear weapons is located in Japan's own neighborhood: North Korea. Pyongyang employs by far the most overt nuclear threats, aimed particularly at intimidating South Korea, Japan, and the United States. This suggests that Japan needs to send a vigorous message of nuclear deterrence, probably more than NATO does vis-à-vis Russia. However, a second challenge is that there does not seem to be a consensus in Japan on how far it would be willing and prepared to go in its deterrence language in the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance—first, vis-à-vis North Korea, but potentially with respect to Russia and ultimately China as well. NATO's Warsaw communiqué showed how far the Obama administration was willing and prepared to go vis-à-vis Russia, while whether the Trump administration will maintain the same position is still uncertain.

Tokyo's awareness of this issue seems to be rising. On the occasion of the first formal summit meeting between Prime Minister Abe and President Donald Trump in February 2017, the two leaders issued a joint statement that “the U.S. commitment to defend Japan through the full range of U.S. military capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, is unwavering.”²³ Given the increasing threat posed by North Korea's ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests, the term “nuclear” appeared in a summit document for the first time since 1975.²⁴

In the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance, deterrence messages are normally sent by ministerial “2+2” meetings between the foreign and defense ministers from Japan and the secretaries of state and defense from the United States—officially called the Security Consultative Committee. Reference to nuclear capabilities and commitments became more common in the mid-2000s. The document from the October 2005 meeting of the Security Consultative Committee stated that “U.S. strike capabilities and the nuclear deterrence provided by the U.S. remain an essential complement to Japan's defense capabilities in ensuring the defense of Japan and contribute to peace and security in the region.”²⁵ The role of nuclear weapons seems to have been upgraded in May 2007, with the committee stating that “the U.S. reaffirmed that the full range of U.S. military capabilities—both nuclear and non-nuclear strike forces and defensive capabilities—*form the core*

²¹ On the Warsaw communiqué, see Michael Rühle, “NATO's Nuclear Future,” *Berlin Policy Journal*, July 15, 2016.

²² See, for example, Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Commentary: NATO Must Reopen the Nuclear Dossier,” *Defense News*, March 9, 2016; and Camille Grand, “Nuclear Deterrence and the Alliance in the 21st Century,” *NATO Review*, 2016, <http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2016/Also-in-2016/nuclear-deterrence-alliance-21st-century-nato/EN/index.htm>.

²³ “Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release, February 10, 2017.

²⁴ “Kyoudou seimei ni ‘kaku’ meiki: Miki-Fohdo irai nireime” [“Nuclear” Mentioned in the Joint Statement: The Second Time since Miki-Ford], *Asahi Shimbun*, February 15, 2017.

²⁵ Security Consultative Committee, “U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future,” October 29, 2005.

of *extended deterrence* and support U.S. commitments to the defense of Japan” (emphasis added).²⁶ A statement from the committee’s latest session, held in April 2015, mentions “the ironclad U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan, through the full range of U.S. military capabilities, including nuclear and conventional.”²⁷

Compared with NATO language, references to the nuclear component of U.S. extended deterrence to Japan remain short and less specific. However, given that an explicit nuclear commitment by the United States is seen as the “premium content,” something enjoyed by only a group of privileged U.S. allies, the modest or somewhat restrained language employed by the U.S.-Japan alliance by no means suggests that the alliance is weak when it comes to extended nuclear deterrence.²⁸ Yet, given North Korea’s missile and nuclear development, the pace of which is much faster than many expected, as well as China’s continuing nuclear modernization, the alliance’s current language regarding extended nuclear deterrence is becoming insufficient and untenable. At the very least, as situations change, the response needs to be reviewed. Owing to the political reality and the state of public opinion in Japan regarding issues related to nuclear deterrence, a nuclear message similar to NATO’s Warsaw communiqué still would be too controversial. Moreover, it is not yet clear whether Washington would be prepared to employ the NATO-level language in the U.S.-Japan alliance: the respective contexts are certainly different. Most notably, NATO’s nuclear posture partly depends on Europe’s contribution in the nuclear domain through nuclear-sharing arrangements. Yet it would be ironic if Tokyo were to be more cautious than Washington when it comes to nuclear messaging, given Japan’s interest in enhancing the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.

Apart from domestic considerations, a strategic and military reason that Tokyo has not needed to highlight the nuclear component more in the U.S.-Japan deterrence posture concerns the role played by ballistic missile defense, which is a bigger and more established element in the U.S.-Japan alliance than in NATO.²⁹ Both Japan and the United States have always preferred an integrated approach to extended deterrence, encompassing the nuclear, conventional, and ballistic missile defense components.³⁰ Reflecting this preference, the dialogue mechanism between the two countries, which was designed to address the nuclear component, is named the Extended Deterrence Dialogue, without mentioning “nuclear.”³¹ Yet the fact that Japan’s ballistic missile defense plays an important role by no means suggests that it is unnecessary for the alliance to upgrade its nuclear deterrence message given the worsening security environment facing Japan and the region.

²⁶ Security Consultative Committee, “Alliance Transformation: Advancing United States–Japan Security and Defense Cooperation,” May 1, 2007. See also Michito Tsuruoka, “Nuclear Proliferation, Deterrence and Strategic Stability in East Asia: The United States, China and Japan in a Changing Strategic Landscape,” in *Routledge Handbook of Nuclear Proliferation and Policy*, ed. Joseph F. Pilat and Nathan E. Busch (London: Routledge, 2015).

²⁷ Security Consultative Committee, “A Stronger Alliance for a Dynamic Security Environment: The New Guidelines for Japan–U.S. Defense Cooperation,” April 27, 2016, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/ampo/js20150427e.html.

²⁸ Andrew O’Neil, *Asia, the U.S. and Extended Deterrence: Atomic Umbrellas in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 121.

²⁹ On Japan’s approach to ballistic missile defense, see Sugio Takahashi, “Ballistic Missile Defense in Japan: Deterrence and Military Transformation,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Asie.Visions*, no. 59, *Proliferation Papers*, no. 44, December 2012.

³⁰ Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons for the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

³¹ See Tsuruoka, “Nuclear Proliferation, Deterrence and Strategic Stability in East Asia,” 59–62.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this essay is to show the linkage that exists between Russia's nuclear saber-rattling and NATO's response to it, on the one hand, and Japan's extended nuclear deterrence challenges, on the other. Expanding the scope of discussions on Japan's security and defense policy and the U.S.-Japan alliance can provide new perspectives on challenges and possible ways forward. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling, whether Tokyo likes it or not, affects the security environment in which Japan is situated. The evolution of NATO's nuclear posture, particularly the nuclear language used in the July 2016 Warsaw communiqué, suggests what could be contemplated in the U.S.-Japan alliance, despite all the differences between the two theaters and alliance structures. More effort is certainly needed to promote cross-regional approaches to extended nuclear deterrence. Importantly, this must be a two-way street: not only do Asians (and Americans in the Asia policy community) need to pay more attention to Europe and NATO, but Europeans (and Atlantic-oriented Americans) need to pay more attention to Asia.

Thinking about the Unthinkable: The Case of the Korean Peninsula

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NOTE: The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the government of Japan or the National Institute for Defense Studies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines how North Korea's potential deployment of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles could fundamentally transform the geostrategic landscape in Northeast Asia and draws implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

MAIN ARGUMENT

North Korea's potential deployment of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles would have game-changing effects in Northeast Asia. Traditionally, Japan has been a safe staging area for a Korean Peninsula contingency, as was the case during the Korean War. With nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, however, North Korea could intimidate Japan into not cooperating with the U.S. Considering the huge strategic benefits for North Korea of intimidation of Japan, the possibility of nuclear blackmail, strikes against military facilities, or even nuclear warning shots should not be excluded. To reassure Japan in that situation, the U.S. should prepare some measures to increase the credibility of extended deterrence and augment the capability to limit any damage. One particular issue is that retaliation-based deterrence does not physically block missile strikes. If the size of North Korea's ballistic missile arsenal is greater than the number of interceptors defending Japan, the ballistic missile defense system would be exhausted before the attack ends. Thus, the U.S. may need to revisit its nuclear utilization strategy to prevent the launch of nuclear-tipped missiles in the first place.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. and South Korea should reconfirm Japan's indispensable role for U.S. military operations on the Korean Peninsula. Given that Japan will face tough decisions in a Korean Peninsula contingency, sharing information about the operational planning process between the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance is important.
- Under the threat of nuclear blackmail by North Korea, Japan needs qualitatively and quantitatively upgraded assurance from the U.S.
- In addition to retaliation-based deterrence and missile defense, the U.S. needs to consider the full range of options for damage limitation, including the nuclear option. If it is necessary, the promptest and surest means to destroy global targets, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles, should be on the table to physically prevent North Korea from launching nuclear missiles.

Since the 1990s, North Korea has steadfastly pursued development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Facing this challenge to international peace and stability, the international community made significant efforts to block these programs, such as the Agreed Framework in 1994, the six-party talks in the 2000s, and repeated UN Security Council resolutions. Yet after multiple nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, North Korea is likely to succeed in the development of a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. The 2016 version of Japan's defense white paper provides the following assessment:

Considering that the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China succeeded in acquiring such technology by as early as the 1960s, as well as the technological maturity reached through North Korea's previous four nuclear tests, among other factors, it is possible that North Korea has achieved the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and has developed nuclear warheads.¹

Given Kim Jong-un's highly provocative behavior and intimidating statements by North Korean officials, North Korea's deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles would cause the regional security situation to deteriorate significantly.² Regional countries thus need to seriously prepare for a nuclear crisis, ranging from a contingency with a strong nuclear shadow to an actual nuclear attack.

In light of this grave security situation in East Asia, this essay will examine the implications of North Korea's potential deployment of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles for U.S. extended deterrence in the case of Japan and Japan's expectations for the U.S. nuclear deterrent. The first section will survey the traditional geostrategic landscape in Northeast Asia to determine what kind of change would be brought about by North Korea's deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles. The essay will then examine North Korea's "theory of victory" for utilizing these missiles to improve strategic balance in the region and analyze the implications for extended deterrence by the U.S.-Japan alliance. The conclusion will discuss the policy implications for both Japan and the United States, including the importance of a damage limitation capability and the necessity to re-evaluate the role of nuclear weapons.

The Geostrategic Landscape in Northeast Asia before North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Development

Nothing illustrates Japan's geostrategic significance for the security situation on the Korean Peninsula more vividly than the Korean War. After North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, the Korean People's Army marched southward, forcing the United States to retreat to the Busan area. Although Japan was still under occupation by the United States throughout the Korean War and the Japanese government did not conduct sovereign decision-making, as a geographic rather than a political entity, Japan nevertheless played an indispensable role in the U.S. defense of South Korea. General Douglas MacArthur located the UN Command headquarters in Tokyo.

¹ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2016* (Tokyo, 2016), 23, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2016/DOJ2016_1-2-2_web.pdf.

² While there have been many intimidating statements by North Korea, one example is the remark by Choe Son-hui, the head of a North Korean delegation to a conference in Beijing, that "we're very pleased because we now can confidently cope with whatever nuclear war the U.S. launches." See "Kim Says Missile Launch Gives North Korea 'Capability' to Attack U.S. in Pacific," FOX News, June 23, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/06/23/kim-says-missile-launch-gives-north-korea-capability-to-attack-us-in-pacific.html>.

Bases in Japan were used for strategic bombing of North Korea, while the United States launched the Inchon landing operation from Japan, which quickly turned the tide of the war in its favor. Japanese industry also provided huge logistical and maintenance support for U.S. forces and other militaries joining the UN Command.

In these ways, Japan played a vital role in supporting the U.S. defense of South Korea during the Korean War. An important factor in the success of U.S. operations was that North Korea did not possess the capabilities to attack Japan.

This geostrategic landscape of the Korean War, whereby Japan was utilized as a safe staging area and played a supporting role, continued to exist until recently. It still provided the basic framework for the 1997 revision of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation. The guidelines included the notion that the Japan Self-Defense Forces would provide “rear-area support” to U.S. forces in a situation that threatens Japanese security. The Defense Guidelines thus assumed that Japanese territory would continue to be a safe staging area for operations in the combat area. In the latest revision of the Defense Guidelines in 2015, which was revised in parallel with the reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution and created a standing coordination body (the Alliance Coordination Mechanism), Japan’s logistical support is an important part of U.S. operations.

The Game-Changing Effect of North Korea’s Deployment of Nuclear-Tipped Ballistic Missiles

This traditional geostrategic landscape in Northeast Asia has been changing significantly as a result of North Korea’s deployment of nuclear weapons and missiles. Since the 1990s, North Korea has developed various ballistic missiles, including medium-range missiles capable of reaching Japan, such as the Nodong. In addition, beginning with the first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea has conducted a total of five tests, with the most recent one occurring in September 2016. The clear goal is to develop small nuclear warheads to load onto ballistic missiles. While nobody knows how close North Korea is to achieving this reality, as noted above, the Japanese Ministry of Defense estimates in its 2016 defense white paper that “it is possible that North Korea has achieved the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and has developed nuclear warheads.”³ This suggests that regional countries and the United States need to be prepared to treat North Korea as capable of launching nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles.

The deployment of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles by North Korea would have game-changing implications for Northeast Asia because it would provide the Kim regime with a strike option against Japan that was impossible during the Korean War. In other words, if a conflict were to break out on the Korean Peninsula, Japan could no longer be considered a safe staging area. Instead, both the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago would be combat areas. This means that Japan’s decision-making to support U.S. forces on the peninsula by permitting the use of bases for military operations or even passage through Japanese territorial waters and airspace by U.S. military assets would be a highly tough one because of the risk that North Korea might launch a nuclear attack on Japan. The United States thus may no longer be able to take Japanese support for granted in a Korean Peninsula contingency.

³ Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Defense of Japan 2016*.

In the past, the mainstream understanding was that North Korea viewed its nuclear and missile programs as a diplomatic “bargaining chip” to ensure regime survival. However, the efforts of the United States to achieve a diplomatic solution—for example, through the Agreed Framework or the six-party talks—have all been in vain. Considering these failures to curb North Korea’s steady nuclear and missile development, the international community is now beginning to realize that North Korea has no intention of ceasing its program, leaving very little hope of reaching an agreement for denuclearization.⁴

Based on this assessment, the international community should consider the possibility that North Korea’s ongoing development of its nuclear and missile capabilities has a more proactive objective such as ensuring regime survival by minimum deterrence or even gaining a strategic advantage through developing its escalation ladder. In other words, North Korea might have a “theory of victory,” to borrow a phrase from Brad Roberts.⁵ Considering its consistent efforts and huge investments under tough economic conditions, North Korea must have a deep strategic rationale for its nuclear and missile programs. In this sense, assuming that the regime has a serious theory of victory would be a sensible starting point to develop a credible posture for strategic deterrence under the U.S.-Japan alliance.

In this new strategic landscape, North Korea’s escalation ladder beyond the Korean Peninsula can be summarized as follows. The lower rung is the deployment of theater ballistic missiles, including nuclear-tipped ones, to block and interdict Japan’s support for the United States and South Korea in a conflict or to intimidate Japan into not providing support. Higher up the ladder is the deployment of nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) for decoupling the U.S.-Japan alliance and the U.S.-South Korea alliance. If these weapon systems were deployed, Japan and the United States might be placed in a situation where they are unable to defend the Korean Peninsula without considerable risk.

More specifically, U.S. bases in Japan would play a critical role in the U.S. response to a potential Korean Peninsula contingency. U.S. reinforcements from all over the world would need to pass through Japanese territorial waters or airspace to reach the peninsula. Considering the geostrategic importance of Japan’s location, North Korea would likely try to intimidate the country into not providing support for the United States, possibly through nuclear blackmail. Japan and the United States need to consider this kind of intimidation as a likely scenario. If Japan succumbed to North Korea’s blackmail and denied support to the United States, U.S. forces in South Korea would lose support from outside the Korean Peninsula, drastically improving the strategic situation for North Korea. Considering the strategic benefits for North Korea, nuclear blackmail, as well as nuclear warning shots, attacks against military facilities to interdict U.S. operations, and even a counter-city strike to increase the credibility of North Korean intimidation, should be regarded as plausible scenarios.

⁴ Scott A. Snyder, “Confronting the North Korean Threat: Reassessing Policy Options,” prepared statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 31, 2017, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/013117_Snyder_Testimony.pdf.

⁵ Brad Roberts pointed out that “a few potential adversaries have thought in a serious and sustained way about conflict with the United States under the shadow cast by nuclear weapons, both theirs and ours.” Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

The United States remains committed to providing extended deterrence for Japan.⁶ However, given the importance of Japan in the U.S. response to a Korean Peninsula contingency, the United States needs to significantly augment its commitment, including through the reinforcement of missile defense assets or even the deployment of strategic assets to cast a nuclear shadow. If Japan were actually attacked, the United States would need to launch a massive counterstrike against North Korea's strike forces. To deal with this U.S. reaction, North Korea would take countermeasures against the United States. Nuclear-tipped ICBMs would play that role. If Pyongyang succeeds in the development and deployment of nuclear-tipped ICBMs, this development would raise the stakes for a U.S. retaliation against a North Korean strike on Japan.

Of course, even if North Korea were to succeed, the size of this force would be small, and a ground-based midcourse defense system deployed in Alaska and California could address it. It is currently unimaginable that North Korea could acquire the capability to inflict unbearable damage on the United States (in other words, an assured destruction capability). Even without such a capability, however, Pyongyang still might make the strategic calculation that it could deter U.S. retaliation for a strike on South Korea or Japan, given that nuclear-tipped ICBMs would hold the United States at risk of a nuclear strike. Needless to say, regardless of the specific intentions and calculations driving North Korea's nuclear and missile development, the strategic effects of the deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles would be significant. To prepare for this scenario, Japan, the United States, and South Korea need to develop a theory of victory for this new strategic environment in Northeast Asia.

The Formulation of a Counter Theory of Victory: Expectations for U.S. Nuclear Forces

Given the gravely increased risk of providing support for the United States as an ally in the case of a Korean Peninsula contingency, Japan requires both qualitatively and quantitatively upgraded assurance from the United States, considering that nuclear blackmail by North Korea would put hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives at risk. Extended deterrence includes two different aspects. One is deterrence against the challenger (North Korea), and the other is assurance for the ally (Japan). In the 1960s, British defense minister Denis Healey summarized the challenge of extended deterrence when he famously observed that "it takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five percent credibility to reassure the Europeans."⁷

To upgrade assurance, the first thing that the United States must do is increase the credibility of extended deterrence through showing more strike forces, including forward deployment of dual-capable aircraft and strategic bombers, to demonstrate to both regional allies and North Korea that the United States is prepared to retaliate if Japan is attacked. Within the alliance, Japan and the United States must regularly hold the Extended Deterrence Dialogue, the latest round

⁶ After North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the United States reaffirmed its commitment of extended deterrence. See Security Consultative Committee, "Alliance Transformation: Advancing United States–Japan Security and Defense Cooperation," Joint Statement, May 1, 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/joint0705.html>. The latest declaratory policy-level commitment on extended deterrence is the joint statement issued after the summit meeting between Shinzo Abe and Donald Trump in February 2017, available from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000227768.pdf>.

⁷ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), 243, quoted in Clark A. Murdock et al., *Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance: Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), 2–3.

of which took place in June 2017.⁸ Through such continuous dialogue, the two countries must further deepen their shared understanding of nuclear deterrence and prioritize efforts to develop a framework for increasing the credibility of extended deterrence to minimize the risk of nuclear blackmail during a Korean Peninsula contingency.

The credibility of extended deterrence is basically grounded in the credibility of retaliation, which has one logical limitation. Even if Japan has 100% confidence in the U.S. commitment, that might not be enough to guarantee the security of Japan. By definition, retaliation occurs after the opponent's first strike and thus would not physically protect Japan. Despite Japan's full confidence in the United States, North Korea might believe that a nuclear-tipped ICBM would be able to deter U.S. retaliation for an attack on Japan. Regardless of the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, there remains a real possibility that Japan could still suffer a serious attack as a result of overestimation on the part of North Korea.

As long as the United States intends to be a global power, regional allies can continue to trust the U.S. commitment to retaliation. If Washington were to refrain from retaliating for an attack on an ally by an adversary with a small nuclear arsenal, such as North Korea, its credibility would be irrevocably damaged, undermining nuclear nonproliferation efforts. The problem, however, is not with Japan's or South Korea's perception of the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence but with North Korea's perception and potential strategic calculations. Once North Korea possesses a counter-city nuclear strike capability against the U.S. mainland, the possibility for Pyongyang to overestimate the deterrent effect of its nuclear-tipped ICBMs cannot be eliminated. Even considering the ballistic missile defense system protecting the U.S. homeland, the failure to intercept just one missile would inflict devastation on the target city. Pyongyang could calculate that such uncertainty would be sufficient to deter U.S. retaliation for an attack on an ally.

To reassure Japan in this context, the credibility of U.S. retaliation against a North Korean strike would not be enough, because retaliation occurs after a country is attacked. Even though North Korea's decision to attack might be a simple miscalculation due to overconfidence in its nuclear deterrent, retaliation cannot save the lives of the people in the targeted city. In this new geostrategic landscape, it is critical for the United States to augment its damage limitation capability, in addition to increasing the credibility of extended deterrence. One assuring fact is that Japan and the United States have already deployed the most advanced and dense theater-based missile defense system in the world. In addition, in case of a Korean Peninsula contingency, Japan will be able to expect reinforcement from a U.S.-deployed missile defense system. It is important to note, however, that kinetic interceptor-based ballistic missile defense has inherent limitations. Even if it succeeds in intercepting nearly 100% of incoming missiles, the magazine would eventually run out if the incoming missiles outnumber kinetic interceptors. In this sense, Japan and the United States could rely on ballistic missile defense in the early phase of a conflict, which would reduce the need to launch a preemptive attack and thereby would contribute to crisis stability. Given the potential for a lengthy campaign of missile strikes to degrade the proficiency of ballistic missile defense, an offensive air campaign against ballistic missile launchers would become increasingly important as time passes.

This means that a plan for a massive U.S. air campaign focused on prelaunch strikes against North Korea rather than merely retaliation is essential to protect Japan against a sustained ballistic

⁸ "Japan-U.S. Extended Deterrence Dialogue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), Press Release, June 14, 2017, http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001625.html.

missile strike. Such an offensive campaign could include conventional cruise missiles, fixed-wing aircraft, or armed unmanned aerial vehicles. In addition, the promptest and surest means, ICBMs, should not be excluded as an option for damage limitation. Needless to say, a strike against road-mobile missiles is a highly difficult military operation, as the example of the first Gulf War demonstrated.⁹ But road-mobile ballistic missiles are moved by transporter-erector launchers (TEL). These launchers are a kind of large truck and are soft targets lacking armored protection. A nuclear ICBM would inflict serious damage against a TEL-like soft target in a wide range of areas if it were utilized in air-burst mode. To this extent, even a nuclear option should be included in damage limitation measures.

Although such measures, including a nuclear option, should not be employed only in retaliation, “preemption” is also not a good word to describe their role. The first wave of a North Korean ballistic missile strike could be addressed by missile defense. But, as discussed above, as the number of interceptors decreases during a lengthy attack, the importance of prelaunch strikes would increase. During such an operation, the full range of options, including the nuclear one, should be mobilized, considering the risk of North Korea’s subjective overestimation of its strategic deterrent. The nuclear option does not need to be the first option considered. But given the promptness and effectiveness of ICBMs to destroy a target, that option should be on the table under the new strategic conditions in Northeast Asia, even before the enemy launches a first nuclear strike.

Conclusion

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has been a serious concern since the end of the Cold War. Assessing the effectiveness of nonproliferation by the international community is not easy and is often a question of whether the glass is half full or half empty. While diplomatic efforts to denuclearize North Korea have not succeeded so far, they might be able to delay its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, there is now a real possibility of North Korea achieving the miniaturization of a nuclear warhead and successfully deploying ballistic missiles, including ICBMs. Pyongyang’s development of these strategic strike capabilities would fundamentally transform the geostrategic landscape in Northeast Asia and allow the Kim regime to formulate a theory of victory.

Japan will continue to play a critical role in any Korean Peninsula contingency, even though it has virtually no direct military commitment. Japan’s unique role is a function of its geographic location. North Korea’s new theory of victory would be focused on improving the strategic situation by eliminating Japan from strategic calculations around the Korean Peninsula. To maintain regional peace and stability, North Korea’s strategic weapons must be neutralized. In that context, the importance of efforts to enhance the credibility of extended deterrence and improve the capabilities of the missile defense system cannot be overestimated. However, both retaliation-based extended deterrence and missile defense have limitations. Thus, the United States must be prepared to use its full range of capabilities, including a nuclear option, to physically prevent North Korea from launching a nuclear-tipped missile.

⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, vol. 1, part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), 188–89, 331–34.

Nuclear strategists have started to revisit arguments about limited nuclear war.¹⁰ As discussed above, in the new geostrategic environment that North Korea's development of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles might bring about, the U.S.-Japan alliance should not just plan for retaliation-based deterrence. An option of nuclear utilization for a pre-launch attack should not be excluded. In this context, the new geostrategic landscape in Northeast Asia might not be an exception to the argument about limited nuclear war. This could be the first stage of a third nuclear age that requires countries to revisit their nuclear utilization strategies following the second nuclear age of nuclear proliferation.¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

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North Korea's Nuclear Posture and Its Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the evolution of North Korea's nuclear and missile program and highlights the political and military implications of this evolving threat for the alliance between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

MAIN ARGUMENT

North Korea has institutionalized becoming a nuclear weapons state as its grand strategy and will never give up its program. It is estimated that within a decade the size of North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal could be similar to other de facto nuclear weapons states. Pyongyang has also made significant progress in miniaturizing warheads to fit multiple ballistic missiles, while working to develop delivery means that are capable of hiding from surveillance and suitable for launching a surprise attack. North Korea thus aims to undermine U.S. extended deterrence and restrain the ROK military's response measures. Demonstrating progress in developing second-strike capabilities is a tool of coercive diplomacy. However, the fact that North Korea intentionally exposes every nuclear and missile development tells us that its strategy relies on the balance of threat. That is, North Korea is trying to heighten its nuclear threats to a level that corresponds to the perceived threat from the U.S. The Kim regime will continue to engage in controlled provocations in order to confirm the psychological value of its nuclear weapons capability without triggering a U.S. preemptive strike. As long as North Korea engages in such tests of resolve, the U.S.-ROK alliance should substantially develop tailored deterrence that currently is only at the conceptual level.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S.-ROK alliance should employ greater use of military demonstrations to put pressure on North Korea.
- The international community should strengthen export controls to increase the cost of WMD-related acquisitions and slow down the North's nuclear armament
- The alliance should develop detailed measures against North Korea's threat of use, imminent use, and actual use, and consider a comprehensive approach to push for regime transformation.
- Developing strategic communication is important to not cause confusion between acknowledging North Korea's possession of a nuclear weapons capability and admitting North Korea's status as a de facto nuclear weapons state.

When North Korea defined the “parallel development of its economy and nuclear weapons capability” as a permanent policy line at the 7th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in May 2016, being a nuclear weapons state was confirmed as its grand strategy.¹ This means that North Korea will never give up its nuclear weapons program. Its recent provocations were not part of the pattern of action and reaction between Pyongyang and Seoul but rather unilateral behavior following a predetermined schedule for developing its nuclear weapons program. After North Korea launched the Hwasong-12—the first ballistic missile test after South Korea elected President Moon Jae-in, who is more open to engagement with North Korea than his predecessor was—Kim Jong-un ordered expedited production of nuclear arsenals and delivery means. He specifically mentioned that Pyongyang should make the United States and its allies face the reality that North Korea is developing diverse, sophisticated nuclear-strike options.² As demonstrated by its successful test on July 4, 2017, North Korea is closer to achieving its goal of mastering intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technology.

These advancements of North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability have both political and military implications. First, North Korea intends to force the international community to recognize its status as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state. Second, its push to develop the operational dimension of its nuclear weapons arsenal poses new challenges to the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) by calling into question the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and reducing the credibility of South Korea’s missile defense system.

This essay begins by assessing the significance of recent developments. It then analyzes the implications of North Korea’s evolving nuclear and missile threats for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

North Korea’s Current Nuclear Weapons Capability

Many observers believe that North Korea will continue step up its efforts to strengthen its nuclear capability. Indeed, nuclear and missile tests in 2016 and 2017 are indicative of North Korea’s determination to diversify its nuclear options. Against this backdrop, it is widely argued that North Korea has reached a significant level of nuclear weaponization and will not abandon its program.³ Although experts disagree in their assessment of its nuclear weapons capability, Pyongyang’s political message is very much clear: North Korea presents its status as a nuclear weapons state as a *fait accompli*.

For this goal to be fully realized, however, North Korea must be free from opposition to its nuclear program. As long as the United Nations imposes sanctions, which are still widely supported by UN member states who submit national implementation reports to the Sanctions Committee, North Korea is unlikely to achieve *de facto* status as a nuclear weapons state regardless of its possession of nuclear weapons. This means that it will struggle to achieve the international recognition that India, Pakistan, and Israel enjoy through the tacit acknowledgment by the international community of their nuclear weapons capabilities.

¹ In a speech on New Year’s Day, Kim Jong-un referred to North Korea as a nuclear and military power in the East. Kim Jong-un, “New Year’s Speech,” Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), January 1, 2017.

² KCNA, May 14, 2017.

³ Ryan Browne and Jennifer Rizzo, “U.S. Intel Chief: North Korea Will Never Give Up Nukes,” CNN, October 25, 2016.

The more the Kim regime demonstrates advancement of its nuclear weapons program, the easier it becomes for North Korea to utilize misperception and confusion over its nuclear weapons state status in order to cause a rift in the approach of concerned countries. On the one hand, North Korea's boldness leads to its misperception of the strategic environment. On the other hand, the change of threat perception shapes the U.S.-ROK alliance's military strategy and force planning to deter and defend against threats from the North. In order to examine the implications of North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capabilities, we need to understand how close the country is to becoming a de facto nuclear weapons state. Several conditions must be met: it needs nuclear material, a detonation device, delivery means, and a command-and-control system.

Nuclear Material

North Korea is believed to be capable of producing about 6 kilograms (kg) of plutonium annually and is expected to produce about 80 kg of plutonium by 2020 and 110 kg by 2025.⁴ The stockpile is expected to reach approximately 140 kg by 2030 when the life of the Yongbyon 5-megawatt-electric reactor is expected to end. Estimates regarding North Korea's stockpile of highly enriched uranium (HEU) remain speculative.⁵ Assuming that it has facilities capable of producing more than 80 kg of HEU per year, North Korea could produce 680 kg of weapons-grade HEU by 2020, 1,080 kg by 2025, and 1,480 kg by 2030. Considering that it takes 2–6 kg of weapons-grade plutonium to manufacture a nuclear warhead, whereas 15–25 kg of HEU are required, the size of North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal could rival the current Indian and Pakistani stockpiles by 2025 and even match Israel's current arsenal by 2030.⁶

Detonation Device

When North Korea claimed that its fourth nuclear test in January 2016 was an experimental test of a hydrogen bomb, this statement caused controversy in South Korea.⁷ In the past, there was a tendency to downplay North Korea's attempts to increase the yield and reduce the size of a nuclear warhead,⁸ but many were alarmed by the North's claim of testing "a nuclear warhead" after the fifth nuclear test in September 2016. Unlike past tests, North Korea claimed that it tested a warhead standardized to be able to be mounted on strategic ballistic rockets, hinting that its arsenals could soon be deployable in the field.

North Korea has prioritized miniaturizing nuclear warheads to mount on existing ballistic missiles, and in March 2016 Kim Jong-un claimed that the North had succeeded.⁹ On the

⁴ According to a white paper issued by the ROK Ministry of National Defense, it is estimated that North Korea possesses about 50 kg of plutonium that can be used to produce nuclear weapons after several rounds of reprocessing spent fuel rods. Ministry of National Defense (ROK), *2016 Defense White Paper* (Seoul, 2017), 21–22.

⁵ North Korea reportedly operates covert facilities in addition to those in the Yongbyon nuclear complex. See *ibid.*; Siegfried Hecker, "What to Make of North Korea's Latest Nuclear Test?" 38 North, September 12, 2016; and Daniel Wertz and Matthew McGrath, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program," National Committee on North Korea, Issue Brief, January 2016.

⁶ Sang Hyun-lee, "Strategy for Denuclearization of North Korea" (paper presented at the seminar "Strategies for Denuclearization and Unification Diplomacy" organized by the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, October 18, 2016).

⁷ KCNA, January 6, 2016. After the January 2016 test, North Korea argued that it produced nuclear fusion materials that can be used to increase the magnitude of its nuclear warheads and develop technologies for miniaturization. The North claimed that its fourth nuclear test was of a hydrogen bomb, but the South Korean government refused to recognize it. After the fifth test, however, there seems little disagreement that North Korea has shown greater clarity on its nuclear capability. Kwangsu Kim, "The New Explosive Has Twice the Magnitude of the 4th Test," *Hankook Ilbo*, September 10, 2016.

⁸ Cheon Myeong-guk and Lee Sang-min, "Enhancement of North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Capabilities and Related Strategic Challenges," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, ROK Angle, no. 130, March 2016.

⁹ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 9, 2016.

same day, North Korea's official media outlet, the Korean Central News Agency, showed an object similar to a small-sized nuclear warhead. Later, it was announced that Kim had given instructions to conduct a nuclear warhead explosion test, along with tests of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.¹⁰ In September, North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Institute made a statement that the standardization of the nuclear warhead will enable the North to produce at will a variety of smaller, lighter, and diversified nuclear warheads of a higher strike power.¹¹ The message that the Kim regime is actively sending to the international community is that North Korea's multiple delivery options will give it more flexibility in using nuclear weapons for strategic as well as tactical purposes. This thereby increases the need for the U.S.-ROK- alliance to prepare for a variety of scenarios.

Delivery Means

North Korea warns that it is developing nuclear weapons for a potential strike against U.S. overseas bases in the Pacific and the U.S. mainland.¹² To support this goal, the Kim regime has worked to develop a missile capable of reaching the continental United States.¹³ North Korea's test of a new "ground-to-ground medium long-range strategic missile" in May 2017 alarmed the international community for at least three reasons.¹⁴ First, North Korea mounted a missile on a tracked vehicle that can be located anywhere on the ground and is capable of hiding from South Korean and U.S. surveillance. Second, North Korea possesses missiles using solid-propellant, which require a short preparation time for gas fueling and are thus suitable for launching a surprise attack. Third, the cold-launch methods used in the May 2017 test could help North Korea hide the traces of missile firings and quickly reload more missiles, causing little damage during the launch process. Neither the test of a Pukguksong-2 missile in February 2017 nor the test of a Hwasong-12 missile proved an ICBM range. However, the launch of the Hwasong-14—a two-stage, liquid-fuel missile—is believed to have an ICBM range encompassing most of Alaska, although there is disagreement about North Korea's capability of mastering a key feature that would allow a nuclear weapon atop the projectile to hit its target.¹⁵

Pyongyang has insisted that it has developed an interception-evading feature as well as missile stage separation.¹⁶ After the May launch, North Korea allegedly tested lofted trajectory in order to test the missile's re-entry heat shield.¹⁷ It also claimed that the missile tested in July was equipped with a stable re-entry system that allows a warhead to survive the heat-intensive process of re-entering the earth's atmosphere.¹⁸ Although it is hard to confirm whether such capabilities were demonstrated, Pyongyang's carefully articulated statements right after these tests clearly warn that North Korea is developing a workable ICBM loaded with a large-size heavy nuclear warhead. As we watch its progress, North Korea seems to aim at credibly demonstrating both survivability

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun and Jane Perlez, "North Korea Tests a Mightier Nuclear Bomb, Raising Tension," *New York Times*, September 8, 2016.

¹¹ KCNA, September 9, 2017.

¹² "Righteous Nuclear Power Declares Fall of the Invaders," *Rodong Sinmun*, June 7, 2017.

¹³ KCNA, January 8, 2017.

¹⁴ KCNA, May 14, 2017; and Kim Tae Kyu, "ROK Military, Watch out for the North's KN-08 and KN-14 tests," *Newsis*, January 9, 2017.

¹⁵ Joshua Berlinger, "North Korea Missile Lacks Re-entry Capability, South Korea Says," *CNN*, July 11, 2017.

¹⁶ KCNA, February 13, 2017.

¹⁷ KCNA, June 23, 2017.

¹⁸ North Korea made unprecedented disclosure of the launch scene. However, it did not reveal the relevant scenes to prove a successful testing of the re-entry technology. KCNA, July 5, 2017.

and deliverability of warheads, key criteria for nuclear deterrence. In this light, the country will continue conducting additional ICBM tests until it believes that the United States and its allies view North Korea's deterrence as robust.

Command and Control

North Korea takes command and control of its nuclear arsenal very seriously. As Bruce Blair notes, leaders fearful of a military coup usually apply tight command and control.¹⁹ It is highly likely that Kim, out of concern about political instability, would have built a system that ensures authoritative command and control through which he can exercise a tight grip on the limited number of nuclear weapons. According to North Korea's wartime operations rules, missile units shall strike enemy targets according to the instructions of the supreme leader at any time.²⁰ Kim ordered the military to establish unitary control over the nuclear force and management system in March 2016.²¹ North Korea had already improved its command-and-control system in 2003 by converting an artillery corps into a missile guidance bureau, which was reorganized into the Strategic Rocket Force Command when the Kim Jong-un regime officially began. North Korea renamed the Strategic Rocket Force Command as simply Strategic Command in 2014 and promoted its commander, Kim Rak-gyom, to the rank equal to navy and air force commanders.²²

These changes have several implications. First, they suggest that Kim has increased the role of asymmetric weapons systems in North Korea's military posture. Second, they show a degree of unified command and control over North Korean nuclear and missile forces. Finally, these changes underscore Kim's efforts to ensure faster and more efficient operation of missiles by holding supreme command over the missile forces.

North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy

Although North Korea claims to follow a no-first-use policy for its nuclear weapons, it has hinted that it would use nuclear weapons against either a nuclear attack or a conventional attack on its territory.²³ Article 4 of North Korea's "Law on Consolidating the North's Status as a Nuclear Weapons State" asserts that, in the event of an attack by a hostile nuclear power, North Korea can retaliate according to the final order issued by the Supreme Command. Article 5 also commits to a no-first-use policy against non-nuclear states on the condition that they do not support "aggression" by a nuclear weapons state. In addition, Kim made a vague statement at the 7th Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea that the North will not use nuclear weapons unless hostile forces first violate its "sovereignty" by using nuclear weapons. However, whether the threshold is violation of political or territorial sovereignty remains unclear. It should be noted that North Korea regards protection of its "supreme dignity" (Kim) as equally significant as national survival.²⁴

¹⁹ Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1993).

²⁰ "North Korea's Wartime Operations Rules," *Kyungnyang Shinmun*, January 5, 2005; and KCNA, September 6, 2016.

²¹ "Why Did Kim Jong-un Mention Unitary Control over the Nuclear Force?" *Yonhap*, March 11, 2016.

²² "North Korea Promoted Kim Rak-gyom as a Four-Star General," *Yonhap*, December 4, 2015.

²³ "Law on Consolidating the North's Status as a Nuclear Weapons State," KCNA, April 1, 2013.

²⁴ North Korea recently has claimed that even special force operations are a threat to the leadership and will invite preemptive measures. "North Korea Claims ROK-U.S. Special Operation Targets Supreme Leader and Warned Preemptive Attack," *Joongang Daily*, March 26, 2017.

North Korea's recent rhetoric is increasingly bold. Whereas on October 3, 2006, Pyongyang stated, "We will never use nuclear weapons first,"²⁵ on December 14, 2011, it declared, "We will confront nuclear blackmail with our nuclear deterrence." A few years later, on March 14, 2014, it stated that "the main goal of our diversified nuclear strike is the United States."²⁶ On March 9, 2016, Kim called for the Korean People's Army to be prepared to launch "preemptive attacks" against the United States if there is any indication of a threat to the North's sovereignty and regime survival.²⁷ On June 23, 2016, Choi Sun-hee, deputy director of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed, "Now we are able to deal with any kind of nuclear war if we are forced to do so by the United States."²⁸ In January 2017, Kim warned that North Korea will continue strengthening its preemptive strike capability as long as the United States and South Korea continue joint military exercises.²⁹ More recently, the North warned that it will use its nuclear force to annihilate the potential source of aggression upon any trivial indication of an attempt to preemptively attack its territory.³⁰ The offensive use of nuclear weapons may not be a desirable option for Kim because it would invite regime collapse. In this respect, North Korea will continue to regard its nuclear weapons arsenal as a deterrent. However, it is worrisome that North Korea could find itself trapped by its own words, considering the political cost of not doing something in a crisis situation.

Pyongyang believes that it can mitigate outside threats by making advancements in its nuclear and missile capabilities. In the past, North Korea justified its nuclear and missile tests as a response to hostile rhetoric or UN resolutions denouncing the regime. However, the recent missile tests were unilateral actions unprovoked by any development in the security environment. As long as North Korea's ICBM and submarine-launched ballistic missile technologies remain incomplete, additional nuclear and missile tests are inevitable. Hence, North Korea will likely continue executing its plan for demonstrating a credible nuclear deterrent against the United States.

North Korea's best option at the moment may be to buy time. The Trump administration is currently outsourcing management of the nuclear problem by relying heavily on China. The limitation of this strategy is that the United States can persuade China to use political and economic leverage on North Korea only to a certain degree. Although Beijing wants to avoid confrontation with Washington, it is not in China's interest to push North Korea to the brink of collapse. The United States, South Korea, and North Korea agree on re-engaging in dialogue under the right conditions, but there is no agreement on what these conditions are. In these circumstances, North Korea can buy time for honing the tool of coercive diplomacy.

New Challenges and Preparations by the Alliance

North Korea may use its advanced nuclear weapons capability for various purposes not only during a crisis but also in peacetime. This puts the U.S.-ROK alliance in a situation where it must keep pace with North Korea's balancing efforts by developing countermeasures sufficient to prevent Pyongyang from becoming overconfident about the utility of its nuclear weapons.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DPRK), October 3, 2006.

²⁶ National Defense Committee (DPRK), March 14, 2014.

²⁷ "U.S. Scheme of War and Our Choice," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 9, 2016.

²⁸ Kim Jong-un (speech at the 7th Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea, Pyongyang, May 7, 2016).

²⁹ Kim, "New Year's Speech."

³⁰ "Statement of the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 11, 2017.

According to a joint communiqué, the ROK and the United States are committed to maintaining close consultation to develop tailored deterrence against threats from North Korea. In 2006 the alliance launched an extended deterrence consultative body after North Korea's first nuclear test. In April 2015, it formed the Deterrence Strategy Committee to ensure that extended deterrence for the ROK remains credible. In order to maximize the alliance's deterrent effects, the allies conduct a joint assessment of North Korea's WMD threats, develop various deterrence measures, and hold tailored deterrence strategy tabletop exercises to enhance the alliance's understanding of the strategy. Through consultations, the allies have also developed guidance for implementing the "Concepts of ROK-U.S. Alliance Comprehensive Counter-Missile Operations" (the so-called 4D operational concept of detecting, disrupting, destroying, and defending against North Korean missile threats, including missiles armed with nuclear, chemical, and biological warheads), which was approved at the 47th Security Consultative Meeting in November 2015.³¹ Most recently, on February 3, 2017, ROK minister of national defense Han Min-koo and U.S. secretary of defense James Mattis held talks in which the United States reaffirmed its commitment to strengthen extended deterrence for the ROK using the full range of military capabilities.³²

However, such a tailored deterrence strategy is still in the making. First, this plan remains at the conceptual level and has not yet been fully implemented. Second, military preparedness is not yet established, as areas requiring significant force improvement remain. Third, the two allies seem to have different ideas about how to develop this strategy. Hence, there is no guarantee that the deterrence strategy will be implemented effectively if the security situation in Northeast Asia or the political conditions in the United States change. Considering the structure of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the various consultative bodies between the two allies, it is highly likely that the U.S. defense pledge will be implemented. However, much work remains to be done to improve the current implementation system.

In considering policy options, the South Korean government faces two principal challenges. First, it must address divergent demands from the public to enact more coercive measures against the North while creating the conditions for dialogue. Second, Seoul must resolve questions regarding the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.

South Korea is currently developing indigenous measures while closely working with the United States. The idea that the ROK military should have the indigenous capability to effectively deter North Korea is not new. However, South Koreans are more vocal than before in demanding an independent countermeasure against North Korean threats.³³ Many are concerned about the uncertainty of U.S. foreign policy after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This anxiety was fueled by Donald Trump's remarks during his campaign that South Korea should pay the full cost of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), which runs counter to the previous discussion between the allies. The ROK also fears that the United States may deal with the North in a larger context of "offshore balancing," concentrating on protecting U.S. interests.

³¹ "47th ROK-U.S. Joint Communiqué," November 1, 2015, available from U.S. Pacific Command, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/626977/full-text-of-47th-republic-of-korea-us-joint-communiqué>.

³² Wee Seungho, "The Outcomes and Policy Implications of the ROK-U.S. Defense Ministerial Meeting," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, ROK Angle, no. 149, February 16, 2017.

³³ Polls show that the number of respondents in favor of deploying a missile defense system supplied by the United States dropped from 74% in February 2016 to 60% in September 2016, while support for building stronger indigenous deterrence and defense measures increased. Ji Yong Park and Sung Kyung Kim, "South Korea's Perception of Security Based on the Attitude toward Nuclear Weapons Threats," Asan Institute, Issue Brief, January 26, 2017.

South Korea's priority is developing a three-pronged approach to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. First, it is working to develop the capability to strike North Korea's missile arsenal and related facilities to counter an imminent threat. Second, it is building the Korea Air and Missile Defense system, which aims to trace and intercept incoming missiles at the terminal phase. Finally, the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation plan is focused on retaliation against the North in the wake of a ballistic missile launch. Targets include North Korea's leadership, nuclear-tipped missiles, and military installations. President Moon has emphasized that South Korea will take charge of its own defense and play a bigger role in efforts to denuclearize the North. Specifically, he has vowed to negotiate the early transfer of wartime operational control from the United States and promised increases to the defense budget to fully implement countermeasures against North Korea by as early as 2020.³⁴

However, several concerns will persist as long as North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities continue to advance. Will there be sufficient time for analyzing data on imminent threats and issuing an order? Will there be a clear indication of an imminent attack from the North? How much damage at North Korea's ballistic missile operational area is possible without real-time tracking of missile locations? How would China react to an attack on the ballistic missile operational area near its border with North Korea? Should Seoul be more worried about the possibility of a situation escalating into a crisis as a result of Pyongyang's miscalculation than about increases to the North's strike capability?

With these questions in mind, Washington and Seoul should adopt additional measures until the ROK army builds its own missile defense system. Some in South Korea argue that U.S. bombers rotating through Guam and nuclear submarines patrolling the Pacific may not have a significant impact on Pyongyang's calculus.³⁵ In order to forestall any doubt about the utility of U.S. extended deterrence, the alliance should develop a strategy tailored for new situations and with enhanced capabilities to carry out this strategy in the field.

Conclusion

North Korea has repeatedly warned that it has reached the final stages of preparations for ICBM tests, culminating in the successful test launch of an ICBM in July. The fact that Pyongyang intentionally exposes every step in the development of its nuclear and missile programs tells us that North Korea currently relies on a strategy to maximize threat perception vis-à-vis its perceived threat from the United States. It will thus continue to seek defensive deterrence with a wide range of options to prevent aggression from the enemy.³⁶ North Korea's provocations are intended to confirm the psychological value of its nuclear weapons capability without triggering a U.S. preemptive strike.

Hence, the U.S.-ROK alliance should use every means available to enhance deterrence. These include military demonstrations to put more pressure on the North; stronger export controls to

³⁴ Previously, South Korea had aimed to implement these countermeasures by 2023 through investing 6.2 trillion won by 2016 and 7.9 trillion won in the next five years. Specifically, in order to overcome heavy reliance on the United States, it planned to purchase military assets such as surveillance satellites, high-altitude unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, and anti-ballistic missile radar. Defense Acquisition and Procurement Agency, Press Release, December 20, 2016; and Defense Acquisition and Procurement Agency, Press Release, March 24, 2014.

³⁵ Gikeun Kim and Yongjae Lee, "Will U.S. Strategic Weapons Check North Korea's Reckless Nuclear Gambit?" Yonhap, October 21, 2016.

³⁶ Defensive deterrence reduces potential gains by denying an aggressor the ability to achieve the goals of its offensive action, such as holding friendly forces at risk.

raise the cost of acquiring WMD-related items; detailed measures against North Korea's threat of use, imminent use, and actual use; the adoption of a comprehensive approach to push for regime change; and strategic communication so that there is no confusion about the difference between acknowledging North Korea's possession of a nuclear weapons capability and recognizing its status as a nuclear weapons state.

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Domestic and Regional Constraints on South Korea's Approach to North Korea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay explores the domestic and regional constraints on South Korea with respect to its North Korea policy and identifies the lack of internal and external consensus as a significant hurdle to long-term policy planning and implementation.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Coming on the heels of the fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016 and a series of missile tests that followed, North Korea is the single greatest security problem for South Korea. South Korea's ability to manage this threat is hampered by important domestic and regional constraints. On the domestic front, an analysis of South Korean public opinion and political history suggests that the country lacks a clear national consensus on what to do about the North Korean nuclear problem. The public is largely divided along ideological lines, but this division is mediated by the overall mood of the strategic environment. On the regional level, the great-power rivalry between China and the U.S. poses a unique challenge for South Korea, which seeks to benefit from a mix of engagement and hedging with respect to both China and the U.S. Nonetheless, South Korea's security commitments will ultimately be tied to its relationship with the U.S., given the long history and institutionalization of the alliance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Provided that there are no major changes within North Korea or China, South Korea's choice regarding its North Korea policy may be restricted to limited pressure and talks.
- While South Korea stands to benefit from the development of indigenous capabilities, joint development and acquisition in cooperation with the U.S. may prove to be a more useful next step for addressing the evolving threat from North Korea.
- While there are challenges to cooperation with Japan, South Korea could exert greater effort in areas such as information sharing (i.e., through the General Security of Military Information Agreement) and joint readiness exercises.

North Korea remains the single greatest security threat for the Republic of Korea (ROK). This is especially so given the timing and seismic readings from the fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016 and missile tests that followed.¹ Although Seoul under President Park Geun-hye adopted a decidedly more confrontational approach in dealing with the Kim regime, these measures have done little to dissuade Pyongyang from pursuing its nuclear ambition. For South Korea, a North Korea that is armed with nuclear warheads and possesses a long-range delivery capability would mean an increased risk of escalation or even the failure of deterrence, both of which would be unacceptable. The question for policymakers in Seoul is what, if anything, they can do about this problem.

This essay argues that there are important domestic and regional constraints on what South Korea can do about the North Korean nuclear problem. More specifically, it identifies the lack of internal and external consensus as a significant hurdle to long-term policy planning and implementation. Most troublesome is the fact that this problem is not likely to be resolved anytime soon. Without a unified front at home, South Korea's only choice for addressing this challenge is increased reliance on the long-standing alliance with the United States.

The discussion is divided into three parts. The first section will explore the domestic constraints on Seoul's North Korea policy by examining the deep-seated divisions within South Korean public opinion through the use of survey data. The findings will show that the South Korean public is largely divided along ideological lines, but that this division is likely to be mediated by the overall mood of the strategic environment. The next section focuses on the regional constraints resulting from China's rise and examines South Korea's middle-power diplomacy in navigating between the two great powers. While South Korea stands to benefit from a mix of engagement and hedging strategies vis-à-vis China, its commitments will ultimately be tied to the alliance with the United States. The final section concludes that, absent a unified approach to the North Korean nuclear problem, South Korea's only choice is to strengthen existing relations with the United States by improving deterrence and increasing trilateral security cooperation with Japan.

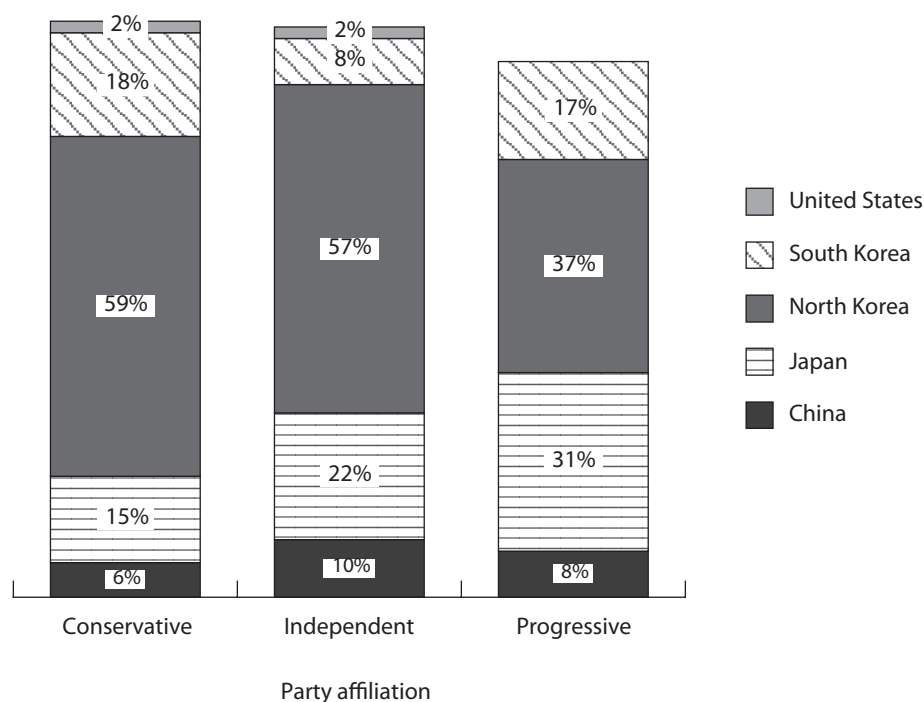
Domestic Constraints

The domestic political constraints on South Korea's North Korea policy rest mainly on the lack of national consensus on what to do about the North Korean nuclear problem. This point is best illustrated by a poll conducted by the Asian Research Network in 2015.² When the survey's South Korean respondents were asked to identify the most likely source of conflict in the Asia-Pacific, they named South Korea (13%) after North Korea (51%) and Japan (22%). This ordering of risks is driven in part by political orientation. As shown in **Figure 1**, conservatives and independents give

¹ "Transcript: Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Forces Korea," U.S. Pacific Command, April 16, 2015, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/585392/transcript-senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-the-us-pacific-command-us>; Siegfried S. Hecker, "What to Make of North Korea's Latest Nuclear Test?" 38 North, September 12, 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/09/shecker091216>; Joel S. Wit and Sun Young Ahn, "North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy," U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS, February 2015, <http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/NKNF-NK-Nuclear-Futures-Wit-0215.pdf>; Markus Schiller, *Characterizing the North Korean Nuclear Missile Threat* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2012/RAND_TR1268.pdf; and William J. Broad, "North Korea Will Have the Skills to Make a Nuclear Warhead by 2020, Experts Say," *New York Times*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/science/north-korea-nuclear-weapons.html>.

² "The Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific," U.S. Studies Centre, June 8, 2016, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/the-asian-research-network-survey-on-americas-role-in-the-asia-pacific>.

FIGURE 1 South Korean views of the source of conflict in Asia by party affiliation (%)



SOURCE: "The Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific," United States Studies Centre, June 8, 2016, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/the-asian-research-network-survey-on-americas-role-in-the-asia-pacific>.

NOTE: Data does not include other survey responses that were too few to draw meaningful conclusions. As a result, the sum of the data for each party affiliation does not necessarily equal 100%.

greater weight to the North Korean threat. Minorities of both conservatives and progressives also tend to see South Korea itself as the greatest source of regional insecurity.

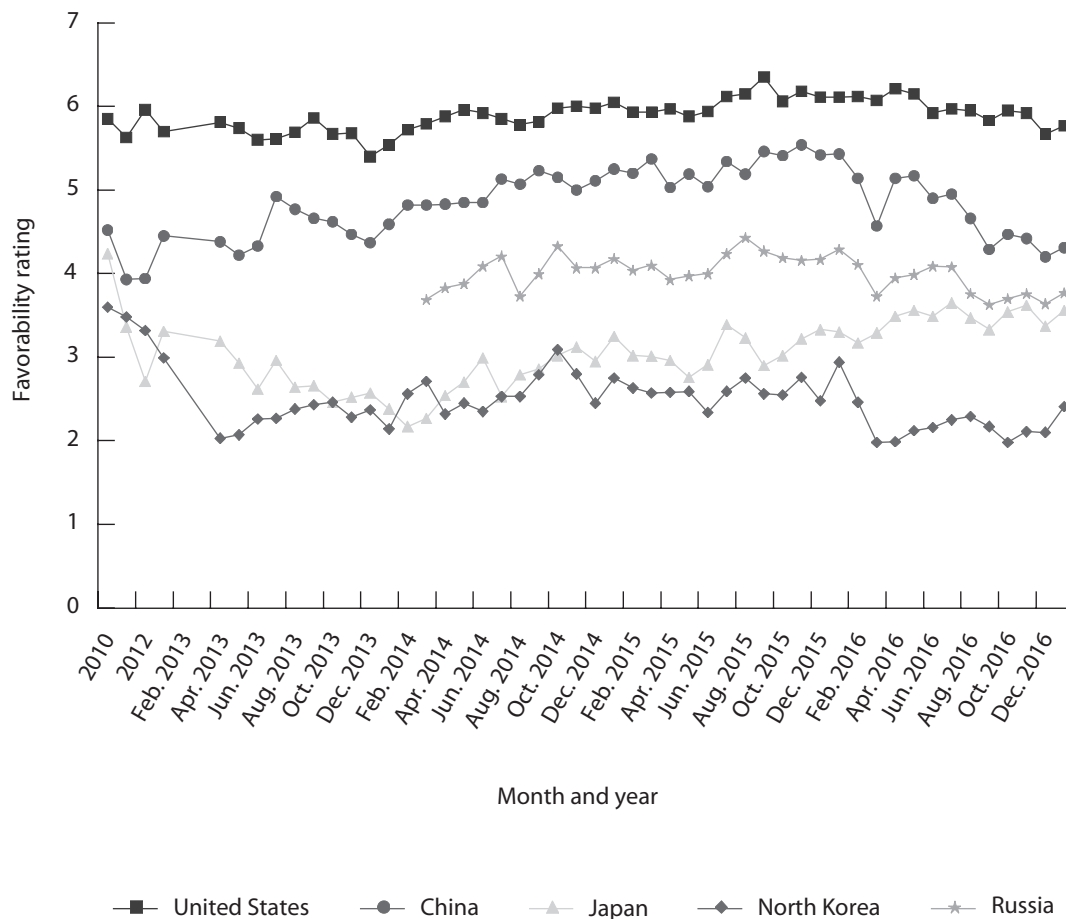
If we understand these dispositions in terms of the history of South Korean politics, we gain a better understanding for why 77% of conservatives and 54% of progressives see both North and South Korea as the greatest security threats in the region. Historically, South Korean progressives, dating back to President Kim Dae-jung, have favored more engagement with North Korea. The Inter-Korean Summit in 2000 under the Kim administration's Sunshine Policy allowed warmer relations between the two Koreas but failed to bring about lasting change within North Korea. Conservatives, on the other hand, take a more hard-line stance. Ever since the end of the Korean War, the conservative party has questioned North Korea's intentions and blamed Pyongyang for most of the domestic strife in South Korea.³ The fact that progressive respondents in the survey tend to identify North Korea as a lower threat than conservatives resonates with this history.

³ B.C. Koh, "Seoul Domestic Policy and the Korean-American Alliance," Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Working Paper, March 1999, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Koh3PM.pdf>; Daniel Wertz, "Inter-Korean Relations," National Committee on North Korea, Issue Brief, January 2017, http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/NCNK_Issue_Brief_ROK%20DPRK.pdf; and Jong-Yun Bae, "South Korean Strategic Thinking toward North Korea: The Evolution of the Engagement Policy and Its Impact upon U.S.-ROK Relations," *Asian Survey* 50, no. 2 (2010): 335–55.

Skeptics may question South Korea's partisan dispositions about North Korea, given that the broader public has generally expressed little affinity toward North Korea and its leader. According to polls conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, for instance, the South Korean public's favorability rating for North Korea has consistently been low in comparison with China, Russia, Japan, and the United States.⁴

South Korean public perception of North Korea also has a tendency to fluctuate with the changing strategic environment (see **Figure 2**). The most significant breaks occurred in February 2013 and January 2016, which correspond to the third and fourth nuclear tests. It is worth noting that after President Park's inauguration and announcement of the 2013 Joint Declaration on the U.S.-ROK Alliance, the allies' North Korean policy held out hope for a negotiated settlement,

FIGURE 2 South Korean perceptions of country favorability



SOURCE: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "Country Favorability" surveys, 2010–16.

NOTE: 0 = unfavorable, 10 = favorable. Data for 2010–12 reflects annual surveys. Data for Russia was not available before March 2014.

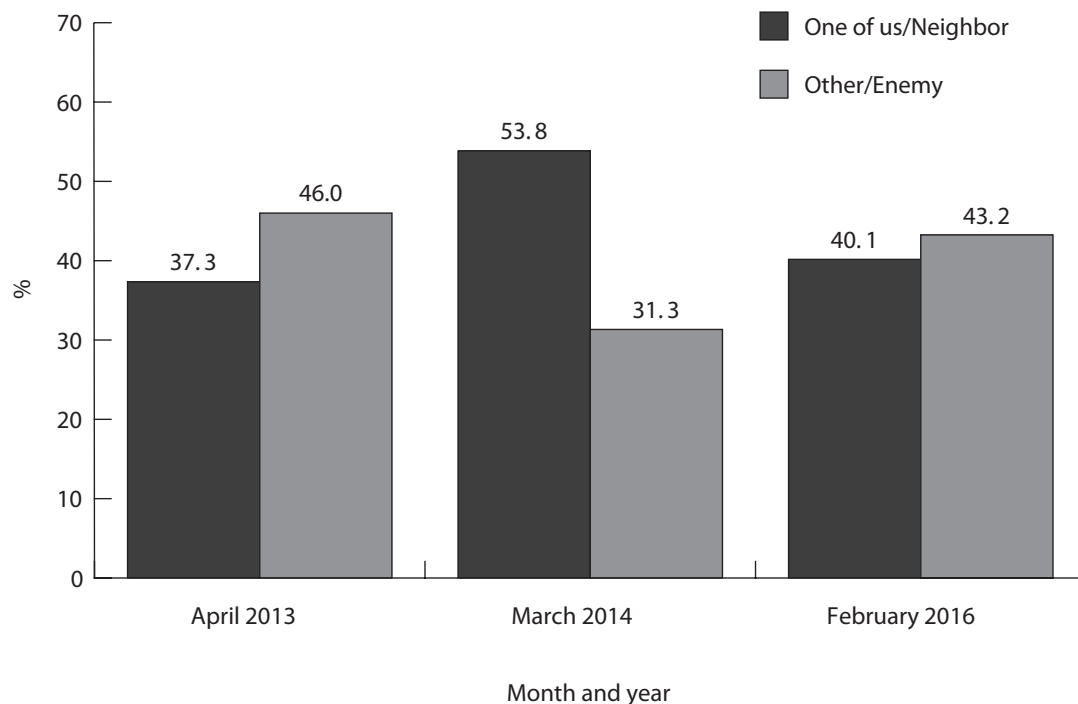
⁴ On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is least favorable and 10 is most favorable, the country favorability rating for North Korea has hardly ever been higher than 3 since early 2013. No other country has maintained such low favorability with the exception of Japan, which dipped below 3 during 2013 and maintained that level until late 2014.

provided that North Korea was willing to discuss denuclearization. Critics euphemistically refer to this approach as “strategic patience.”⁵ President Park’s advocacy of trustpolitik and a “unification bonanza” during the early part of her term appears to have shaped South Korean public perception of North Korea.⁶ In a survey conducted in March 2014, 53.8% of respondents characterized North Korea as “one of us” or “a neighbor,” while 31.3% stated that they saw North Korea as “the other” or “an enemy,” a notably lower percentage than in either 2013 or 2016 (see **Figure 3**). The softening strategic context seems to have promoted a more favorable view about North Korea.

When the overall climate changed after the fourth nuclear test, only 40.1% of respondents saw North Korea as “one of us” or “a neighbor,” whereas 43.2% now viewed it as “the other” or “an enemy.”⁷ The test appears to have changed the overall perception about North Korea, which again speaks to the responsiveness of South Korean public opinion.

Together, these findings suggest that South Korea’s policy on North Korea is likely to lack long-term stability or consistency in the context of similar low-level provocations. History provides

FIGURE 3 How South Koreans view North Korea



SOURCE: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, “Asan Daily Poll,” April 20–22, 2013; March 29–31, 2014; and February 10–12, 2016.

⁵ David Straub, “North Korea Policy: Why the Obama Administration Is Right and the Critics Are Wrong” (remarks presented at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford, May 13, 2016).

⁶ “Unification bonanza” refers to a statement that President Park made during a press conference on January 6, 2014, regarding Korean reunification. The statement was a suggestion that unification would bring wealth and economic success not only for the two Koreas but also for neighboring countries.

⁷ This sentiment was especially strong among those respondents in their 20s (other/enemy: 51.0%; us/neighbor: 30.4%), 30s (other/enemy: 41.8%; us/neighbor: 35.2%), and over 60 (other/enemy: 51.3%; us/neighbor: 35.7%).

evidence in support of this claim. Since transitioning from authoritarian rule in 1986, South Korea has experienced ten-year cycles of conservative and progressive governments: the conservative governments of Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam (1986–97), the progressive governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun (1997–2007), and the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye (2007–17). During each cycle, there was a corresponding change in policy toward North Korea, with conservatives favoring a more hawkish approach and the progressives preferring more engagement. These policy changes occurred despite North Korea's ongoing efforts to develop a nuclear capability after exiting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in the early 1990s.

Regional Constraints

On a regional level, South Korea's choice about North Korean policy is limited by structural constraints arising from competition among various alliance blocs. First, China plays a very important role in perpetuating the survival of the North Korean regime through economic aid and diplomatic protection in the UN Security Council. This is not at all surprising given that China maintains the Sino–North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty. Article 2 of this document guarantees that the two countries will “oppose any country or coalition of countries that might attack either nation.”

For Beijing, continuation of the Kim regime in Pyongyang is in both China's and North Korea's interests. Not only does North Korea serve as an important buffer state on China's eastern front, but any instability within the North may embroil Beijing in a larger regional crisis, which it wishes to avoid.⁸ For North Korea, China is a vital security and trade partner in the region. Without support from Beijing, Pyongyang would have a difficult time resisting multilateral sanctions while addressing the threat posed by South Korea, Japan, and the United States. To the extent that there is no significant change within China or North Korea, the Sino–North Korean relationship is not likely to change significantly.

Second, provided that North Korea remains a security threat for South Korea and the relative position of the United States in Northeast Asia remains unchanged, South Korea's dependence on the U.S. alliance will likely be a given. The U.S.-ROK alliance is a tried and tested framework. It has withstood over 60 years of political transitions under administrations that did not always share similar priorities. The relationship has not only benefited both nations strategically and economically but also ensured the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

However, the alliance faces some significant challenges, which require management. Foremost, it will come under significant pressure once North Korea is able to show convincing proof of miniaturizing and arming a reliable long-range delivery vehicle capable of reaching the United States. This development would not only show that the alliance was inadequate in denuclearizing North Korea but also test the alliance's ability to deter North Korea from engaging in bolder provocations or escalating to a full-scale conflict.

⁸ According to the Asian Research Network, only 9% of Chinese people perceive North Korea as a threat, whereas 12% view the United States as a threat and 56% view Japan as a threat. See “The Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific.” See also Bruce Klingner, “Why China Fears North Korea (and It's Not All about Nuclear Weapons),” *National Interest*, September 10, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-china-fears-north-korea-its-not-all-about-nuclear-17661>; Eleanor Albert, “The China–North Korea Relationship,” Council on Foreign Relations, Backgrounder, April 26, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship>; and Jonathan D. Pollack, “Why Does China Coddle North Korea?” *New York Times*, January 12, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/13/opinion/why-does-china-coddle-north-korea.html>.

China will also continue to test the limits of the U.S.-ROK alliance through a mix of charm and pressure. On the one hand, China has tried to cultivate bilateral relations with South Korea since normalizing relations in 1992. Total trade between the two countries amounted to nearly \$230 billion in 2016. In addition, the total number of Korean students in China has exceeded 60,000 since 2009, while the number of Chinese students in South Korea has surpassed 50,000 since that same year. On the other hand, Beijing has also resorted to pressure tactics when it desires change in behavior from South Korea. The most recent example is China's opposition to the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the Korean Peninsula. Ever since South Korea expressed its intention to work with the United States on THAAD, the Chinese government has used both diplomatic and economic channels to pressure Seoul into changing its stance on the missile defense system. Thus far, these tactics have backfired with the South Korean public, which has expressed strong dissatisfaction with China for meddling in South Korea's national security. In a study conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, for instance, China's favorability rating among South Koreans dropped to a level below that of Japan for the first time since data was first collected in 2010.⁹ Yet regardless of how this latest diplomatic dispute over the deployment of THAAD plays out, China will remain an important factor in South Korean foreign policy given the likely transition in the regional order as a result of China's rise.¹⁰

The delicate bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea presents another challenge for the U.S.-ROK alliance. To the extent that the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia depends on the United States' relationship with both Japan and South Korea, it would bode well for Washington to tighten the link between Seoul and Tokyo. However, this is easier said than done. Tensions between Tokyo and Seoul over historical and territorial issues have prevented these two important U.S. allies from working more closely with one another in the region to address common challenges like North Korea. Despite reaching an agreement on the so-called "comfort women" in December 2015 and signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in November 2016, bilateral relations can quickly turn toxic with one misspoken word or wrong gesture by leaders of either country. When this happens, the allies' ability to present a unified front against North Korean aggression is hamstrung.

Finally, the leadership change in Seoul resulting from the early presidential election in May 2017 could present some challenges for the alliance. The newly elected president Moon Jae-in of the progressive Democratic Party has generally favored a policy of engagement with North Korea. He has so far signaled a willingness to schedule a summit with Kim Jong-un and even reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tours. Given the expansion of international sanctions since the fourth and fifth nuclear tests and the ongoing missile tests by North Korea, it is unclear exactly how the Moon administration would follow through on these objectives. But the orientation of a progressive administration in Seoul would stand as a stark contrast with the policy of "maximum pressure and engagement" favored by the Trump administration.

⁹ Kim Jiyeon, John J. Lee, and Kang Chungku, "Changing Tides: THAAD and Shifting Korean Public Opinion toward the United States and China," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Issue Brief, March 20, 2017, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/changing-tides-thaad-and-shifting-korean-public-opinion-toward-the-united-states-and-china>.

¹⁰ G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia," *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016): 9–43; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979); and Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3–43.

Conclusion

South Korea's effort to sustain a cohesive North Korea policy is constrained by different internal and external forces. Without a focused and coordinated approach to the North Korean nuclear problem, South Korea is left with only one viable option: strengthening existing relations with the United States. This means looking more closely into those areas where both allies can improve their capacity to deter North Korea from engaging in further provocations after it has acquired a reliable nuclear capability. Current efforts to maintain high levels of force readiness and improve deterrence on the Korean Peninsula must continue. Recent moves to introduce the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea and to tighten security cooperation with Japan through the completion of the GSOMIA were steps in the right direction. South Korea should also work to deepen the level of trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan in such areas as information sharing and interoperability. Bilateral relations with Tokyo must be managed very carefully in order to avoid tensions between these important U.S. allies. These steps to improve trilateral cooperation should be accompanied by efforts in South Korea to enhance its own deterrence and defense capabilities through more serious investment in national defense.

The lack of domestic consensus means that these recommendations will not be easy to implement. In this regard, more joint development and deeper security cooperation with the United States are important elements in South Korea's future national security policy. Defense contractor partnerships, such as the one between Northrop Grumman, Firstec, and Korea Jig and Fixture on the production of RQ-4B Block 30 Global Hawks or between Lockheed Martin and Korea Aerospace Industries on the joint production of KF-X mid-level fighter jets, will not only allow the allies to enhance their deterrence capability in a reasonable time frame but also strengthen South Korea's industrial capacity for indigenous development. With more opportunities for joint development, increasing interoperability will be the next logical step. Deepened cooperation and higher institutionalization of the defense relationship will enhance the robustness of the alliance and South Korea's ability to manage the growing North Korean threat.

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Toward a Common Strategy for Deterring a Nuclear North Korea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay argues that the U.S. will need to work more closely with Japan and South Korea to develop a common and coherent deterrence strategy if Washington hopes to reliably deter North Korea and assure its East Asian allies.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The primary objective of U.S. policy in North Korea must be the denuclearization and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, but until that goal is achieved Washington and its allies must work to deter and defend against the existing nuclear threat. During the Cold War, NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy contained a number of core elements: a clear understanding of what the threat was and how the alliance would respond to the threat if deterrence failed, an explanation for why that response should outweigh the benefits of any aggression in the adversary's calculation and what capabilities were required to make the response credible, and mechanisms for communicating that strategy within the alliance and to the adversary. In contrast, some of these elements are missing in East Asia at present. The U.S. and its Northeast Asian allies, South Korea and Japan, must rectify this situation to strengthen nuclear deterrence in the region. They should come to a common threat assessment and then proceed to formulate and articulate a clearer strategy for deterring a North Korean nuclear attack and nuclear coercion.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- If Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul wish to work toward a common deterrence strategy, they should begin by coming to a common understanding of the various threat scenarios posed by North Korea's nuclear forces and how the allies would respond in these scenarios.
- In order to reliably deter Pyongyang, the U.S. and its allies must ensure that they have the capabilities to follow through on the planned response and have appropriate mechanisms for communicating this strategy both within allied governments and societies and to the North Korean leadership.
- The development of the key elements of a common strategy should begin within the strategic planning communities both inside and outside government in all three countries and only then move to higher levels of government for official deliberations.

Do the United States and its East Asian allies, Japan and South Korea, share a common and coherent strategy for deterring a nuclear North Korea? The primary objective of U.S. policy in North Korea must be the denuclearization and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, but until that goal is achieved Washington and its allies must work to deter and defend against the existing nuclear threat. During the Cold War, NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy contained a number of elements: a clear sense of what the threat was, how the alliance would respond to the threat if deterrence failed, what capabilities were required for that response, and what mechanisms existed for communicating the strategy within the alliance and to the adversary.¹ In contrast, at least some of these elements are missing in East Asia at present. In particular, the allies do not have a clear sense of how they would respond to North Korean nuclear provocations. If the allies do not have a common and coherent story they can tell themselves about their deterrence strategy, there is at least some reason to fear that Pyongyang may not be deterred.

This essay will argue that if the United States hopes to reliably deter North Korea and assure its allies, it will need to work more closely with Japan and South Korea to develop a common and coherent deterrence strategy. Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul should come to a common understanding of the various threat scenarios posed by North Korea's nuclear forces and how the allies would respond in these scenarios. They must then ensure that they have the capabilities to follow through on the planned response, as well as appropriate mechanisms for communicating this strategy within allied governments and societies and to the North Korean leadership. While many discussions along these lines have taken place and continue, few clear and compelling conclusions about how best to handle an evolving threat have been reached. The work to address these issues should begin within the strategic planning communities both inside and outside government in all three countries. After a list of options has been refined, it should be taken up by higher levels of government for official deliberations.

The answer to this set of questions has important implications for U.S. and allied security and for strategic stability in East Asia. The North Korean nuclear threat continues to grow.² It is now estimated that Pyongyang possesses enough nuclear material for up to 30 nuclear warheads as well as missiles capable of reaching U.S. forces and allies in East Asia. Moreover, the regime is working to develop longer-range delivery systems that, unless current trends are arrested, will soon be capable of holding the U.S. homeland at risk with the threat of a nuclear attack.³ If the United States and its allies fail to formulate a strategy that adapts to this changing reality and reliably deters North Korean nuclear provocations, the results could be catastrophic.

The rest of this essay will proceed as follows. First, it will briefly discuss the key elements of a successful nuclear deterrence strategy as developed during the Cold War. The second section will discuss the relatively undeveloped state of U.S. deterrence strategy in East Asia today. Next, the essay will explore the issues that Washington and its alliance partners must address as they move to a clearer, shared deterrence strategy. Finally, it will offer concluding remarks.

¹ On U.S. nuclear strategy during the Cold War, see, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

² Jong Kun Choi, "The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2015): 57–72.

³ David Albright, "North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities: A Fresh Look," Institute for Science and International Security, April 28, 2017, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/north-koreas-nuclear-capabilities-a-fresh-look/10>.

Deterrence Strategy during the Cold War

During the Cold War, the United States and its NATO allies possessed a series of strategies to deter the nuclear threat from the Soviet Union. The strategy changed over time as the Soviet threat evolved and U.S. administrations changed—from massive retaliation under Dwight Eisenhower to flexible response under John F. Kennedy, and from a countervailing doctrine under Jimmy Carter to a strategy to “prevail” under Ronald Reagan.⁴ There is of course the danger that, with the benefit of hindsight, one imposes more order and clarity on what at the time felt to participants as a chaotic and dangerous period. And indeed core elements of these approaches were always contentious and heavily debated between the United States and its allies and within the analytic and military communities. Nevertheless, despite internal debates and tensions, each of these strategies contained a number of identifiable elements. U.S. and allied leaders had a general sense of the threats posed by the Soviet Union, how the United States and its allies would respond in the event that deterrence failed, why that response should outweigh the benefits of aggression in Moscow’s calculation, and what core capabilities were required to credibly follow through on the threatened response. U.S. leaders could thus tell a common story to both allies and adversaries about this deterrence strategy and why there was reason to believe that deterrence would hold.

The move from massive retaliation to flexible response best exemplifies the seriousness of Cold War nuclear doctrine.⁵ Once the Soviet Union possessed the ability to hold the U.S. homeland at risk, the idea of a massive U.S. nuclear attack on the Soviet Union that could invite unacceptable retaliation no longer seemed credible. The threat posed by the Soviet Union continued to be a massive conventional invasion of Europe and, secondarily, a more limited military operation in search of an advantage in the competition for the third world. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, U.S. officials began to congregate around a new approach. Rather than turn any limited Soviet military advance into thermonuclear war, the United States and NATO would need to have a range of more flexible options appropriate for the specific scenario at hand. This would require dedicated nuclear capabilities, including the deployment of a wider range of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe to fight limited nuclear wars as necessary. This new approach was then clearly articulated within the alliance and to the Soviet Union through presidential speeches, official government documents, and communiqués of NATO meetings, among other means. The approach even had a simple label—“flexible response.”

Deterrence Strategy in East Asia Today

By the standard of past deterrence strategies, such as flexible response, the United States and its allies lack a clear strategy for deterring the North Korean nuclear threat. This is not to deny that there is valuable activity in this space. U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Strategic Command, for example, almost certainly have war plans for dealing with North Korea. Moreover, under the Obama administration, new and constructive efforts were made to strengthen extended deterrence and assurance through dialogues with partners in Seoul and Tokyo. The Trump administration

⁴ See Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. For the counterargument that the United States and NATO never budged from a deterrence strategy focused on massive nuclear attack, see Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁵ Walter S. Poole, *Adapting to Flexible Response, 1960–1968*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2014).

has completed a policy review and surveyed the waterfront of options for addressing the North Korean nuclear threat, ranging from diplomacy to military regime change.⁶ None of these efforts, however, constitutes an effective strategy because many of the abovementioned elements of strategy are absent.

To take perhaps the most notable example, the United States and its allies do not have a clear sense of how they would respond in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack. Some U.S.-based analysts in recent years have written that if North Korea employed nuclear weapons, then the goal of U.S. nuclear policy must be to ensure that Pyongyang cannot use a second weapon.⁷ This would suggest a kind of second-strike, counterforce strategy and would have one set of implications for U.S. force posture and declaratory policy.⁸ South Korean experts, on the other hand, have stated that they do not know the precise form that a U.S. response would take, but they assume that such a response would be “overwhelming” and would likely result in a U.S. and South Korean invasion of the North, regime change for the Kim dynasty, and unification of the Korean Peninsula. This is one possible option, but it is a very different approach than second-strike counterforce and would have very different implications for capabilities and declaratory policy. Finally, Japanese observers have argued that waiting for a North Korean nuclear strike is unacceptable and that U.S. nuclear strategy must be one of preemption. Washington must conduct a first strike, with nuclear forces if necessary, on the North’s nuclear and missile facilities before Pyongyang can use nuclear weapons in the event of serious hostilities. This presents another plausible option, but it is once again quite distinct from the other two. What is the threatened U.S. response in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack? And if the United States and its allies are not themselves certain of this answer, can we assume that Kim Jong-un will be certain that the costs of a nuclear attack outweigh the benefits?

The lack of a widely agreed-upon response to a North Korean nuclear attack is the most obvious gap in current U.S. thinking about deterrence in Northeast Asia, but it is not the only one. Indeed, many implications flow from this lacuna. If we are not certain of our best response to a North Korean nuclear attack, then it follows that we cannot be sure that we have the appropriate set of offensive and defensive capabilities to support the strategy. And without these elements, we cannot clearly communicate effective deterrence and assurance messages to the necessary audiences at home and abroad.

This astrategic situation is not, of course, confined to North Korea. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States and its allies have not faced a pressing nuclear threat, and many have accused Washington of going on a strategic holiday.⁹ With the re-emergence of great-power challenges from Russia and China in recent years and the rapid advance of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, however, the United States must work with its allies to develop a set of serious nuclear strategies.

⁶ Jenny Lee, “Trump Reviews Policy on North Korea Amid Talk of Regime Change,” *Voice of America*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/donald-trump-review-policy-north-korea-talks-regime-change/3705606.html>.

⁷ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Next Korean War,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2013-04-01/next-korean-war>.

⁸ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Nukes We Need: Preserving the American Deterrent,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2009-11-01/nukes-we-need>.

⁹ Paul J. Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 2012).

Toward a Common and Coherent Nuclear Deterrence Strategy

The United States and its East Asian allies must work together to develop a common and coherent strategy to deter a North Korean nuclear strike. The work should begin among the analytic and strategic communities both inside and outside government and only later, once the list of available options has been refined, be taken up by higher-level decision-makers. The process should be led by Washington but include close collaboration with partners in Tokyo and Seoul.

Some in the United States have argued that close collaboration could actually undermine U.S. assurance goals. According to this line of argumentation, it is better to give allies a vague message of reassurance because bringing them into the details of planning could raise troubling questions about the efficacy of extended deterrence. In contrast, my contention is that the allied partners are capable of handling a comprehensive and transparent discussion about extended deterrence, which will ultimately strengthen rather than weaken U.S. assurance objectives.

The process must begin by identifying the most likely and troubling threat scenarios posed by the North. Not enough is known about North Korean nuclear strategy, but there is an emerging view that Pyongyang most likely envisions using nuclear weapons early in a conflict to offset the conventional power of its adversaries in order to deter a large-scale military invasion and regime change.¹⁰ This and other possibilities must be thoroughly studied.

Next, the analytic community must carefully study the values of the North Korean regime, what it holds dear, and what the United States and its allies can hold at risk as part of a deterrence strategy. Should the United States and its partners threaten invasion and regime change in response to a nuclear attack? Or should they instead threaten nuclear retaliation? If nuclear retaliation, should it be a second-strike, counterforce strategy? Or is waiting for a nuclear attack inconsistent with the allies' needs, and is preemption instead the better answer? Or should the strategy be one of flexible response in which any or some combination of the above may be employed depending on the severity of the attack by the North? If the latter, this should be a deliberate choice made to enhance deterrence, not an easy way out resulting from an unwillingness to confront hard choices about nuclear strategy.

Once decisions are made about the appropriate deterrence strategy, then the next step must be to ensure that the United States and its allies possess the capabilities to credibly carry out the threat. For example, if a preemption strategy is preferred, Washington must ensure that it has the necessary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tools to track and target North Korean mobile missiles.

Finally, the allies must decide on a communication strategy. Deterrence is often enhanced by clearly communicating the nature of the planned response to the adversary. In other instances, some degree of ambiguity over the likely response may contribute to deterrence. In either case, however, this should once again be a deliberate choice. Ambiguity should only be selected as part of a coherent strategy, not due to lack of clarity about the nature of the strategy.¹¹

The enemy, however, is not the only target of a messaging campaign. Given that the United States seeks to assure allies in Japan and South Korea, and because all three nations need to maintain public support, mechanisms are required for communicating the nature of the threat

¹⁰ Jeffrey Lewis, "North Korea Is Practicing for Nuclear War," *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/09/north-korea-is-practicing-for-nuclear-war>.

¹¹ Many believe, for example, that the United States' calculated ambiguity about its potential response to a chemical or biological weapons attack enhances deterrence.

and the contours of the planned response to high-level government audiences as well as to the general public. For example, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo should develop a multilateral forum modeled on NATO's High Level Group in which decision-makers from all three governments can discuss strategic policy and release communiqués from the meetings to the press.

Conclusion

The United States does not accept North Korea as a nuclear-armed state as a matter of declaratory policy. Washington must continue to work with its partners to cap and eventually roll back Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. Until that goal is achieved, however, the United States and its allies must recognize that North Korea is armed with nuclear weapons and put in place a serious strategy to deter the Kim regime. A common and coherent strategy, as properly conceived, does not yet exist. Developing such a strategy will no doubt be difficult, but it will be much less painful than failing to deter a North Korean nuclear attack.

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Conclusion: The North Korean Crisis and the Second Nuclear Age

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Like its predecessor, the second nuclear age has unfolded more slowly than some had expected and many had feared. Since India and Pakistan conducted their multiple, parallel tests in 1998, three aspiring nuclear weapons states—Iraq, Libya, and Syria—have been removed from contention by force or coercion. Another—Iran—has agreed under diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to suspend its efforts, at least for now. Only North Korea has thus far succeeded in crossing the nuclear finish line, despite U.S.-led efforts to prevent it. To date, the post-Cold War flow of new nuclear weapons states has come in drops rather than a sudden cascade.

North Korea's progress in expanding and perfecting its arsenal, on the other hand, has been surprisingly rapid. Following its initial, and by most accounts only partially successful, detonation of a fission device in 2006, Pyongyang pressed ahead with a series of weapons tests and with the development of a variety of increasingly long-range delivery vehicles. If it has not already done so, the North is generally assumed to be close to perfecting the techniques necessary to build small, light warheads of significant yield, and it will soon be able to put them on solid-fueled ballistic missiles capable of striking targets at increasing range. In July 2017, U.S. officials reported that Pyongyang had conducted its first successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile. Depending on the capacity of its plutonium-reprocessing and uranium-enrichment facilities, the North could have enough fissile material to build an arsenal of as many as 80 weapons by 2020. After an interval of inaction and "strategic patience" under the Obama administration, these developments are stirring a new sense of urgency in Washington and across Northeast Asia.

Most of the essays in this report proceed from the assumption that, despite the growing threat they pose, North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile programs cannot be stopped or rolled back. Unfortunately, the history of the last two decades provides little reason for optimism on this score. All the factors that have conspired to enable Pyongyang to reach this point still seem to be in place. Like his father, Kim Jong-un appears to regard nuclear weapons as the best available tool with which to deter an attack and extract concessions from other nations, and as the ultimate guarantor of his personal safety. No package of benefits—neither economic assistance, nor diplomatic recognition, nor paper promises of security—will be sufficient to persuade him otherwise.

The only scenario in which Kim might conceivably agree to part with his nuclear weapons would be if he were faced with the certainty of his own imminent demise. A credible threat to this effect has sadly proved difficult to arrange. Despite some tough talk from President Donald Trump, the United States and South Korea still lack an effective answer to the North's non-nuclear counter-deterrent—its ability to rain death and destruction on Seoul using artillery, special forces, and perhaps chemical and biological weapons in response to a preemptive strike on its nuclear forces. Even if U.S. and South Korean decision-makers were willing to take this risk, Pyongyang's long-standing strengths in tunneling and deception, and its imminent deployment of multiple mobile missile launchers, would make a "splendid," disarming preemptive strike with conventional weapons extremely difficult to carry off and impossible for military planners to promise with assurance in advance.

This leaves only the threat of economic strangulation through sanctions far more stringent than any that have yet been imposed, including tight constraints on commercial trade, imports of critical foreign-manufactured components essential to North Korea's weapons programs, the "illicit activities" (including drug running and counterfeiting) that earn the regime hard currency, and the financial institutions through which dollars flow in and out of the country. Here the key player is China. Despite its protestations to the contrary, Beijing could effectively cut Pyongyang

off from the world, perhaps bringing the regime to its knees. The Trump administration has sought to cajole or coerce China into taking more aggressive steps, hinting that it might be preparing to take military action and imposing some preliminary sanctions on a Chinese bank accused of assisting the North.¹ But Beijing has thus far refused to budge, presumably for fear of causing the regime to collapse, unleashing a flood of refugees, and perhaps leaving a unified democratic and U.S.-allied state on its border. In the past, China has also found the North Korean nuclear issue, and the promise that it would somehow help resolve this problem, to be a useful source of leverage in its dealings with the United States.

Recent statements from semi-official sources hint that Beijing might be willing at some point to tighten sanctions on the North, perhaps if it detonates another nuclear weapon.² If China could be persuaded to act, and if Pyongyang can be deterred from proceeding, it is conceivable that the maturation of its programs could at least be slowed. Whether such a ploy would work (and for how long), what Beijing would demand for its services, and whether Washington would be willing to pay this price all remain to be seen.

Assuming that the North retains and continues to improve its nuclear-strike capabilities, how should the United States and its allies respond, and what are likely to be the implications, both for regional stability and for the subsequent unfolding of the second nuclear age? The allied response to the evolving nuclear threat will clearly involve some mix of defensive and deterrent measures. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system to South Korea and the ongoing strengthening of U.S. and Japanese land- and sea-based missile defenses can help reduce the North's confidence in its ability to strike its enemies. These measures also may cause the regime to expend additional resources on building more weapons and developing decoys or maneuvering re-entry vehicles to increase the odds that at least some warheads will reach their targets.

U.S. and South Korean conventional forces have sufficient fighting power to overwhelm their opposition, invade the North, topple the Kim regime, and reunite the Korean Peninsula. In order to deter Pyongyang from using its growing nuclear arsenal, and to defeat it if it does, the United States, in conjunction with its allies, will also need to re-examine its own capabilities and plans for conducting limited nuclear operations. As Michito Tsuruoka points out, this may require the development of new systems to supplement the relatively small number of aging B61 gravity bombs remaining in the U.S. arsenal.

But are stronger defenses and a more credible deterrent sufficient for dealing with a leader like Kim Jong-un? Even a very good missile defense system can be overwhelmed or defeated, and if just a single warhead gets through, the consequences would be catastrophic. The certain knowledge that the United States will avenge their deaths with a crushing retaliatory blow is hardly reassuring to the potential victims of a North Korean nuclear first strike. For these reasons, as Matthew Kroenig notes and as Sugio Takahashi discusses at length, the United States, and perhaps its allies as well, may need to prepare to preempt such an attack. According to Takahashi, in the event of a severe crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Tokyo may need to be persuaded that the United States

¹ Alan Rappeport, "U.S. Imposes New Sanctions over North Korea Ties," *New York Times*, June 29, 2017.

² According to the *Global Times*, "China will not remain indifferent to Pyongyang's aggravating violation" of existing UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting further weapons tests. The article claims that "more and more Chinese support the view that the government should enhance sanctions over Pyongyang's nuclear activities. If the North makes another provocative move...the Chinese society will be willing to see the UNSC adopt severe restrictive measures that have never been seen before, such as restricting oil imports to the North." "Is North Korea Nuclear Crisis Reaching a Showdown?" *Global Times*, April 12, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1041998.shtml>.

possesses such a capability and is willing to use it at the first sign of an impending North Korean strike before Japan agrees to allow U.S. forces to operate from bases on its territory. Takahashi strongly implies that the United States may even have to make clear that it is willing to use nuclear weapons (“the promptest and surest means”) to disarm the North. This proposal and the issues it raises demand further discussion, not only between Washington and Tokyo but with Seoul as well.

If Kim succeeds in fending off international pressure and continues to improve and expand his nuclear forces, he will likely feel emboldened to engage in yet more threatening and provocative behavior against North Korea’s neighbors. Safe behind his nuclear shield, Kim will demand economic benefits and shows of respect, and he may even entertain renewed hopes of somehow achieving eventual forced reunification with the South. Provided that nothing happens in the near term to shake their confidence in U.S. security guarantees, neither Tokyo nor Seoul will make any sudden moves toward acquiring their own nuclear weapons. But further unchecked development of North Korea’s capabilities, and the visible failure of yet another round of U.S.-led efforts to stop them, will lend urgency to the quiet discussions of this eventuality that are already underway in both capitals.

Beyond the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang’s successful defiance of the United States will inspire others to believe that, with the right combination of audacity and subterfuge, they can do the same. The lessons that Tehran may draw from this drama are especially troubling. Meanwhile, the North’s growing stockpile of fissile material and its increasing expertise in the design and manufacture of weapons and delivery systems will raise the risk of onward proliferation to other states and possibly even to nonstate actors. The second nuclear age is just getting started.



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