



Response to PacNet #20 “Reading Into South Korea’s Nuclear Debate” by Jinho Park

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The four separate arguments of *PacNet #20 (“Reading Into South Korea’s Nuclear Debate”)* outlined by Toby Dalton and Yoon Ho Jin require careful review. The South Korean discussion of nuclear options seems to underestimate the importance of a balanced effort that explores nonmilitary opportunities. Exploring nuclear options against North Korea’s nuclear threats likely means that South Korea would face more uncertainties rather than gain new strategic opportunities.

First, North Korea developed nuclear weapons not to deter the use of US tactical nuclear weapons, but to strengthen the chances of regime survival and enhance negotiation leverage with South Korea and the US. North Korea’s belief that the US would not allow South Korea’s nuclear weapon development likely influenced its decision that benefits would surpass the costs of developing its own nuclear weapons. From this perspective, it is doubtful that South Korean nuclear weapons would help dismantle North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

Second, there is no 100 percent guarantee of a US nuclear response in the case of a North Korean invasion. The decision to do so is up to the US president in consultation with the South Korean president. The redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons into South Korea will not change the decision-making mechanism between the two leaders. It is possible that the two leaders might have a different situational assessment caused by the “fog of war.” Combined military operations and plans would play a limited role in removing operational uncertainties during the crisis.

Third, the argument that South Korean nuclear weapons would alter the calculus in North Korea nuclear negotiations is too idealistic. Threats posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons fundamentally vary to South Korea, the US, China, Japan, and Russia. Although these countries officially pursue a goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, they have different strategic options for managing – not dismantling – North Korea’s nuclear threats. South Korea’s possession of nuclear capabilities would likely make these countries more concerned about their own security rather than North Korea’s nuclear weapons. This shift of priority toward individual interests would make it more difficult to act together to change North Korea.

Fourth, the US might not be prepared to sacrifice Los Angeles for Seoul. But it is appropriate to ask whether Korea

is ready to take the strategic responsibility to defend the US as its ally. The majority of Americans believe that burden sharing between the two allies is not equal, and that the greater burden is on the US. The provision of a nuclear umbrella to South Korea is part of the mutual defense treaty. From this view, South Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons to promote self-defense independent of the US might endanger the alliance amid preparations for the transfer of wartime operational control in 2015. It is not realistic for Korea to share an equal burden with a superpower. But the US insists on increasing Korea’s responsibility commensurate with its enhanced national capabilities.

Lastly, the argument that “it is too early for Washington to consider additional ways to bolster US extended deterrence and reassurance commitments, but that time may come soon if and when North Korea makes new provocations” is likely to continue our failed deterrence policy in negotiating with North Korea. The fundamental strategy of deterrence is to take action first rather than waiting and then taking an appropriate response. Now, Korea has a chance to change its policy in responding to North Korean provocations and should:

- *Refresh our thinking about engagement policy toward North Korea, convincing it to cooperate by demonstrating costs and benefits, and China’s role in changing North Korea.*
- *Change our strategic mindset toward North Korea, and shift from ‘persuasive’ to ‘coercive’ in an effort to change North Korea’s cost-benefit calculations.*
- *Establish a multilateral mechanism that focuses on the role of the United Nations Security Council for the peace of the Korean Peninsula and Asia.*
- *Explore South Korea’s use of China-North Korea economic cooperation to improve relations between the two Koreas.*
- *Adjust the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty to a changing regional security environment to upgrade the Korea-US alliance system and promote regional peace and stability.*

An unrealistic assessment of North Korea’s nuclear threats will create strategic uncertainties at the domestic, regional, and international levels for Seoul by triggering domestic political divisions over policy toward North Korea, upsetting a balance of military capabilities that is already challenged by diplomatic and military tension over disputed islands and the US military pivot to Asia, and weakening a global nonproliferation regime.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.