



## **ARMS CONTROL WITH NORTH KOREA? OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

BY HIDEO ASANO

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In recent years, North Korea's development of nuclear missile capabilities has led to a growing [discussion](#) on nuclear risk reduction and potential arms control with Pyongyang.

Such opinions stem from the realization that the US longstanding approach to North Korea toward denuclearization has not worked as intended; despite Washington's heavy sanctions and demands for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization, Pyongyang has not halted—even advanced—its nuclear and missile development.

As an alternative, initiating risk reduction and arms control dialogues with North Korea could provide an opportunity to prevent a nuclear war and deescalate regional arms racing, while that would also pose significant challenges for US alliance relationships.

### **Heightening nuclear escalation risks**

Over the past few years, North Korea has conducted a series of [missile tests](#). In doing so, Pyongyang is believed to be rapidly advancing its [tactical nuclear](#) and [ICBM](#) capabilities.

With these advanced forms of hardware, North Korea appears to envision a war plan that may include a nuclear first strike to repel an enemy's invasion. As [a possible scenario](#), Pyongyang could use its theater nuclear missiles at an early stage to destroy enemy forces and installations in South Korea and Japan, while also attempting to deter the United States from entering an all-out retaliation by threatening the use of ICBMs against the US homeland.

More worrying is how this plan could interact with US-ROK [military strategy](#), which reportedly includes potential strikes against North Korean missile units and possibly its leadership if an imminent nuclear attack is detected. This would give Pyongyang an incentive to launch nuclear strikes before its nuclear system or regime is devastated. [Its nuclear policy law](#) permits a nuclear attack if the country's leadership or command and control were threatened. This dynamic would create more room for an [inadvertent nuclear escalation](#) during a crisis or in a conventional conflict with North Korea.

Such nuclear risks are not irrelevant for Tokyo as well—if North Korea were to decide to escalate into a nuclear conflict, its nuclear missiles would likely hit not just South Korea but also Japanese territory.

Given such nuclear risks, pursuing risk reduction measures is worth considering. For example, the United States and South Korea can [modify](#) their war plan that forsakes disarming strikes against the North Korea's command and control and/or the decapitation of its leadership. In return, they can demand that Pyongyang promise not to delegate authority to use nuclear weapons to field commanders, and launch bilateral strategic dialogue. Such reciprocity also might pave a [path](#) toward potential arms control with North Korea to limit its nuclear and missile development and capabilities. This would benefit all the parties in preventing escalating tensions and a costly arms race.

### **Two decoupling and reassurance of US allies**

While there could be benefits in engaging North Korea to advance nuclear risk reduction and arms control measures, the United States would also need

to keep reassuring its regional allies of its defense commitment if it were to pursue this course of action.

As is often discussed, North Korea's development of ICBMs has raised a "[decoupling](#)" concern for South Korea—if a Korean contingency occurred, the United States might not deliver on its commitment to defend South Korea, fearing North Korea's nuclear ICBM attacks against the homeland. In such a scenario, Washington would have to reckon whether it would sacrifice, for example, San Francisco to defend Seoul. More worrisome in North Korea's case is that the United States would face this difficult question even if it were to retaliate with conventional forces, as Pyongyang reserves—and even increasingly [relies](#) on—a nuclear first use option in response to conventional attacks. This fear of decoupling might be augmented as [North Korea](#) modernizes and expands its ICBM capabilities, making the missiles more likely to [penetrate](#) US missile defense systems. The United States would therefore need to continue to reassure South Korea as long as North Korea retains ICBM capabilities.

In addition to South Korea, the United States would also need to provide reassurance to Japan that its commitment to extended nuclear deterrence is credible. [Japanese security experts](#) worry that, in the event of another Korean war, North Korea could threaten the use of nuclear MRBMs to compel Japan to prohibit the United States from using its military bases located in Japan—another decoupling that can fracture the US-Japan alliance. This would significantly constrain the US ability to effectively counter North Korea's military action on the Korean Peninsula. Thus Japan would need to be reassured if North Korea's MRBMs were left unchecked in an agreement between Washington and Pyongyang.

The need to reassure South Korea and Japan might also be significant if the United States were to attempt to limit North Korea's ICBMs in the early stage of negotiation. Although curtailing ICBM threat to the US homeland would make decoupling less likely in theory, Seoul and Tokyo might feel that a deal that allows Pyongyang to retain theater-range nuclear missiles [sidelines](#) their security interests, casting

doubt on how much Washington cares about allies' security.

In terms of reassuring allies, the United States should also carefully consider the provision of negative security assurance—an assurance not to use nor threaten to use nuclear weapons—to North Korea. Despite its potential benefits, US allies might perceive it as undermining the US commitment to extended nuclear deterrence.

In these cases, the United States must find a way to simultaneously reassure South Korea and Japan, while pursuing nuclear risk reduction and arms control. These reassurance challenges, in short, boil down to addressing a question of what constitutes credible deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea for all the three parties. Reaching a trilateral agreement on this issue, at least adequately if not perfectly, is crucial on the way that Washington initiates nuclear risk reduction and arms control measures with Pyongyang. Otherwise, risk reduction and arms control efforts would simply fail or result in sacrificing the security of one or both allies. Thus alliance coordination would be critical before entering into and during negotiation with North Korea.

### **The case for upgrading extended deterrence talks**

Therefore, seizing opportunities for nuclear risk reduction and arms control would require extensive US-Japan-ROK dialogues. The three countries should examine both the potential benefits and security concerns of negotiating with North Korea. To this end, the United States and Japan, as well as the United States and South Korea, should consider including nuclear risk reduction and arms control in an agenda of their respective extended deterrence talks (Extended Deterrence Dialogue for the US-Japan and the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group Meeting for the US-ROK). Such conversation could be expanded to hold a track 1.5 trilateral dialogue by inviting Korean or Japanese scholars as part of respective dialogues. This might eventually open up a possible US-Japan-ROK trilateral dialogue on these issues. In such a way, the three countries should explore the possibility of advancing nuclear risk reduction and arms control measures with North

Korea, while continuing to discuss how to maintain credible extended deterrence.

Some would argue that initiating risk reduction and arms control measures with North Korea would have negative consequences for global nuclear nonproliferation. This might be true; however, these measures can be placed as interim steps toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In this regard, the three governments would need to find [a balanced, contemplated political rhetoric](#) that satisfies North Korea as well as international and domestic audiences. The denuclearization process would indeed have to proceed step by step, gradually reducing hostilities and nurturing trust and confidence between the parties. Thus the three states can flexibly combine various [options](#), including not only limiting North Korean nuclear missiles, but also taking posture-level measures, freezing nuclear tests and development, curbing fissile material production, and many others.

Having meaningful dialogues with North Korea may sound overly ambitious and unrealistic, given geopolitical tensions on the Korean Peninsula in recent years. At the same time, such tensions and regional arms racing have considerably heightened nuclear risks today. And that is exactly the reason why the trilateral dialogue toward nuclear risk reduction and arms control should be taken seriously.

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