YOUNG LEADERS PROGRAM

STRATEGIC COMPETITION: DON'T SLEEP ON NORTH KOREA

BY DIANA MYERS

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Kim Jong Un with what North Korean state media says are tactical nuclear weapons. Photo: Rodong Sinmun.

In the era of strategic competition, China and Russia are the key players in US foreign policy—the same sentiment rung true during the Long-Term Competition and Nuclear Deterrence workshop hosted by the Center for Global Security Research at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The mention of North Korea only arose a handful of times.

It's a no-brainer that from the perspective of US nuclear strategy, heightened focus on long-term competition would be centered around countries who have historically and will most likely pose the greatest strategic risks to safeguarding the interests of the US.

With President Putin's revisionist geopolitical agenda in Ukraine renewing the debate on the effectiveness of Russia's deterrence strategy and President Xi's relentless pursuit for the "China dream," the seemingly eroding strategic environment has forced the US and its allies to rethink its traditional deterrence strategy in the modern world.

Despite the attention centered around the US, China, and Russia when it comes to long-term competition and nuclear deterrence, however, we must remember that there are other adversaries eager to challenge the US and her allies— namely a comparatively weaker, but (at times) dangerously bellicose State with nuclear weapons: North Korea.

Don't Sleep on North Korea: It's an N-Body Problem

Panelists frequently mentioned the "three-body problem" to characterize US-China-Russia's strategic competition problem, borrowing from a physics analogy which the interactions of three or more masses are unstable with no general solution. Unlike the Cold War-era, this makes the US approach to deterrence fundamentally different and significantly more challenging than resorting to the generally understood notion of mutually assured destruction.

The "three-body problem," while perhaps sufficient to characterize Washington's peer nuclear threats, does not encapsulate the complexities of its other smaller but persistent nuclear adversaries, such as North Korea— in reality, the US deals with an N-body problem. Though the relative nuclear arsenal of the "three-bodies" dwarf North Korea's current nuclear arsenal and delivery capabilities, Kim Jong Un has vowed to increase these numbers. More concerningly, Pyongyang has effectively renounced the no-first-use doctrine, stating legitimate grounds to preemptively deploy its nuclear weapons to preserve the survival of the regime. What Kim would consider sufficient grounds for nuclear use to protect the survival of the regime remains opaque, but as a panelist noted, "nuclear risk perceived by the adversary, is held by

the adversary"— the risk is whatever Kim would deem unacceptable. Moreover, Pyongyang's declaration of first-use in tandem with an abundance of security literature on why weak states choose to go to war should be a red flag for why Pyongyang, despite its conventional inferiority, has and will pose a perennial challenge for Washington and Seoul as Kim expands his nuclear arsenal.

Moreover, North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal will force the US and its allies to contend with another troubling reality: dealing with a regional power with rogue tendencies. For one, we must be careful to properly characterize North Korea in the N-body problem. Despite Pyongyang's comparatively close geopolitical proximity to Beijing and Moscow as recently highlighted by munitions transfers between Russia and North Korea, in addition to China and North Korea's partnership dating back to the Korean War, one may be inclined to bucket Pyongyang in the same group with one of the other "bigger" players…this is a dangerous presumption. Regardless of how "allied" they call themselves; the China-Russia-North Korea dynamic can be described as an *entente* at best.

North Korea's strategic relationship as a regional buffer between the former Communist States and the West has afforded them a position of influence with China and Russia; one that they can now leverage and wield effectively with the ownership of nuclear weapons to go after their own strategic objectives. In some ways, Pyongyang has become too dangerous to fail, namely for Beijing who Pyongyang shares a bulk of its borders with along the Yalu River—a failed state with lethal weapons on its immediate border would cause a geopolitical nightmare for Beijing whilst causing considerable headache for Moscow. Knowing this, Pyongyang will likely become an emboldened actor in the region, leveraging its nuclear weapons and pugnacious tendencies to secure its interests through threats as a "legitimate" nuclear weapons state.

In the long-run, China-Russia-North Korea are three disparately acting "cogs" against US interests. Therefore, Washington is dealing with an N-body problem (with N>3), and as a panelist noted separately, "do not sleep on North Korea."

Accepting Extended Deterrence: Not a Freeloader, but a Big Concession

As evidenced throughout the workshop, the US is still trying to "figure out" what long-term deterrence looks like in the modern of age of strategic (nuclear) competition. However, given the eroding strategic environment, participants agreed that US deterrence adaptation should be scheduled and even accelerated. With Indo-Pacific being the most challenging theater for the US and its allies, it arguably requires the greatest deterrence adaption. So, what does this mean for Indo-Pacific allies and partners in the long-run?

The workshop concluded that alliances are key assets in long-term competition as they generate deterrence and cooperation to strengthen and expand US influence abroad. Moreover, the US has worked to raise their allies' nuclear deterrence IQs, such as the launch of the Nuclear Consultative Group between Seoul and Washington last year.

While these are steps in the right direction, the US must also be cognizant of allies' perceptions: Are we doing enough to make them *feel* secure? A participant rightfully noted that the acceptance of extended deterrence by our allies should not be perceived as them acting as freeloaders, but rather as their concessions to give up developing their own nuclear weapons. A concession that was widely contested in countries like South Korea, where indigenous nuclear weapons development was a hot topic for key political debates during the 2022 Presidential Elections.

Therefore, questions such as, "is maintaining escalation dominance over North Korea worth the cost?" could be misconstrued by our South Korean allies if Seoul believes that Washington will not make good on its extended deterrence promise if push comes to shove during a nuclear conflict. In long-term competition, messaging is critical to our partners and allies.

America as a Responsible Competitor: How Much is Enough?

A recurring theme during the workshop centered around what can only be described as figuring out a "responsible" way for the US to formulate its

competition strategy. Washington must act in a way not to trigger adversary competition response that makes us ultimately less secure, whilst having enough nuclear weapons to ensure the safety of the US mainland and make good on our extended deterrence promises abroad. Moreover, managing arms control is preferable to unrestrained competition, especially with the New START Treaty set to expire on February 2026 with no replacements.

While responsible strategic competition is critical, we must also remember that our (even weaker) adversaries get a vote too. So, how much is enough?

The workshop concluded with no definitive answer.

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