

Brief Research Report

Program for Asia-Japan Research Development,
Asia-Japan Research Institute
March 2022

Analyzing the Risks of Nuclear War in Northeast Asia

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In October 2021, Professor Van Jackson (Victoria University of Wellington), the author of two books with Cambridge University Press: *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (2018), and *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (2016), delivered a keynote speech on a webinar titled "Analyzing the Risks of Nuclear War in East Asia" organized by our joint research project that I have been participating in as chief researcher and coordinator. In his lecture, he pointed out that Northeast Asia is experiencing *nuclear precarity*, that is, the risks of nuclear war in Northeast Asia are intolerably high because of the way that situational and structural risks are both increasing and intersecting. He characterized the nuclear dangers Northeast Asia is facing in three ways: "situational versus structural risk", "the pattern of Northeast Asia's international relations since the Cold War", and "three specific pathways to war on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait".

In conclusion, he suggested four ways to prevent the occurrence of nuclear war in this region: pursuing arms control with China and North Korea, going for security institutionalism that goes beyond mere alliance politics, reducing domestic inequality to avoid the rise of ethnonationalism, and challenging the militarist mindset in the region.

In my reply to Professor Jackson's thought-provoking speech, I pointed out the following points: US-JPN-ROK trilateral military cooperation has been continuing in Northeast Asia since the Korean War. The war promoted the establishment of a US-centered nuclear deterrence system, which includes the UN's command in the Korean Peninsula, the US-JPN security treaty, and the US-ROK Mutual

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Published online: October 14, 2022.

Defense Treaty created with the intention of deterring possible communist invasions, especially from the USSR, China, and the DPRK.

This US-centered nuclear deterrence system in Northeast Asia has continued even after the Cold War ended, with the intention of countering a new regional threat here, namely North Korea, a threat which the US and its allies have deterred so far. The US-centered nuclear deterrence system has also expanded its role to include more actively deterring Chinese intervention in Taiwan, if we take note of the words, "Taiwan Strait", shockingly appearing in both the US-Japan leaders' statement and the US-ROK leader's statement this year respectively.

The problem here is that North Korea perceives the status quo with the US-centered nuclear deterrence system as an offensive threat to its survival, while the US and their allies view their role in maintaining the status quo as a defensive one. This perception gap has driven North Korea to develop and upgrade its nuclear weapons citing self-defense, and vice versa: the US and its allies have developed cutting-edge weapons under the name of national defense as well. When the perception gap between the US and North Korea grows rapidly it may prompt a nuclear crisis, and this has actually occurred four times in the Korean Peninsula over the past three decades.

In other words, the perception gap (misperceptions) has caused security dilemmas normally associated with arms races and nuclear crises (the rise of crisis instability) around the Korean peninsula. To put it more simply, actions that were intended to deter their perceived enemies have sparked arms races and inflamed tensions between them. This indicates that the more the US seeks to strengthen the existing trilateral military cooperation to deter North Korea, the more difficult it will be to stop the advancement of the DPRK's nuclear weapons.

Interestingly, there has recently been a gradual power shift from the US. While it is true that the US enjoyed a unipolar system as the only superpower in the world after the dissolution of the USSR, that is no longer the case due to the decreased military gap between the US and communist states like China, Russia, and North Korea. In fact, there is now a reverse missile gap, where the US may be inferior to the communist states when it comes to short- and medium-range hypersonic missiles (in both glider and air-breathing technologies) from China and Russia that have already been deployed. Additionally, the fractional bombardment system (FOBS) that Russia, China, and North Korea have been developing in addition to ICBMs, can now be used to deliver nuclear bombs to the US mainland, including Washington D.C. and New York.

While the US has made every effort to maintain an advantageous military balance by withdrawing from the INF treaty and developing short- and medium-range missiles in the area where it has fallen behind so far, its counterparts have been equally enthusiastic in further advancing their weaponry. Thus, it seems difficult for the US to stage a rapid comeback in the near future as a hegemon in a new unipolar system, which indicates a backrush to multipolar internationalism from unipolar globalism.

What is interesting here is that the Japanese establishment is now witnessing the frontline that existed only in the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War being moved/expanded to Japan. For

example, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and the former Minister of the Treasury Department Aso Taro have publicly stated on separate occasions that "Japan has become the frontline in the age of US-China confrontation." Their statements were likely inspired by the fact that nuclear and conventional weapons launched from China and North Korea are now capable of reaching Japanese soil (including Tokyo and Osaka) within 10 minutes; this was not the case during the Korean War when Japan was able to function as a safe supply base for the US-led troops.

Likewise, as the US is aware of this development, it has rotated more of its troops stationed abroad and dispensed additional weaponry to counter the risk of increasing threats from China and North Korea. Moreover, the US has seemingly taken to buck-passing in its alliance strategy. In other words, by empowering its allies in the Asia-Pacific, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia with additional military support, the US is diverting the sole responsibility of keeping China and North Korea threat in check away from itself.

As the surroundings have changed, the DPRK has chosen to continue its advancement of strategic and tactical weapons. In its eighth conference of the Worker's Party of Korea held in January of 2021, North Korea decided to continue advancing its nuclear weapons, and has strengthened its nuclear detonation capabilities by restarting to show us the activities at Nyonbyon nuclear complex since the end of 2020, and improved its delivery systems by testing railway-launched short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs, but that may not be viewed as ballistic), long-range cruise missiles, hypersonic glide missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

This advancement in nuclear weaponry is obviously an increasing nuclear threat to the US allies in this region, and if North Korea applies the recent advancements by the tests of SRBMs and MRBMs to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and FOBS technology, they will have also become a bigger threat to the US mainland than they were when the DPRK signed a moratorium to cease testing ICBMs. This decision of the eighth conference mentioned above also indicates that its nuclear strategy would shift from minimum deterrence to a MAD-oriented scenario. The minimum deterrence strategy which was adopted at the Third Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea held in April 2018, had previously declared the completion of its development of a nuclear force that could deter the US, and instead, concentrated on the construction of a socialist economy. However, the decision of the eighth party conference clearly shows us that the DPRK has decided to go beyond that by further improving their nuclear capabilities.

This five-year nuclear armament plan will be unstoppable unless the US can resolve the situation in which North Korea perceives an unfair double standard in its international treatment, where the international society criticizes only North Korea for testing weapons for national defense, even though the US and its allies are doing the same. In his speech during the 5th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly held in September 2021, Kim Jong Un pointed out this double standard as hampering the resumption of talks, as did Kim Yo Jong. This double standard issue can be regarded as one of the perception gaps between the US and the DPRK.

What is important here is that from past case studies, we can observe that what deaccelerated

the DPRK's nuclear armament was the talks for arms control, rather than economic sanctions for compellence. Talks can reduce the perception gap between the US and the DPRK, and help them agree to a moratorium, after providing reassurances to each other through deal-making. Now that North Korea is adamant that the US must resolve the perceived double-standard issue as a prerequisite to resuming talks, the current standstill may last longer than expected.

In conclusion, the confrontation between the US and DPRK over the Korean Peninsula, as well as the one between the US and China over the Taiwan Straits, has triggered crisis instability in Northeast Asia. The US and their allies are liable to argue that "left of launch" is necessary to prevent enemy missiles from going off from the launch pads, because their MDs would likely not be able to intercept them perfectly. Meanwhile, North Korea's attitude toward the no-first-use policy has fluctuated so far, but it does not eliminate the possibility of them drawing first blood with nuclear weapons, based on Kim Jong Un's remarks. The arms race of hypersonic glide/cruise missiles in this area will also lead to more severe crisis instability. The faster missiles are deployed one after the other, the greater time pressure key decision-makers will feel under, and the more contingencies will be put in place. Based on history, the escalation of these contingencies is what triggers war, such as happened with World War I.

Therefore, it is vital to establish a framework for preventing the occurrence of low-intensity conflict and the escalation to nuclear war in this region. In this regard, the inter-Korean military agreement on September 19, 2018 should be a beneficial one, which North Korea seems to understand since it spontaneously resumed the use of inter-Korean hotlines in October 2021, even though the friction between the two Koreas remains unsolved. If the Second Korean War ever breaks out, North Korea will inevitably use its advanced nuclear weapons to attack the US mainland and Japan in addition to South Korea, which will have a high likelihood of devastating those countries. For this reason, a framework for preventing the occurrence of nuclear war should be beneficial to them as well.

Human beings must not be so foolish as to wage a third world war with nuclear weapons. In particular, Koreans should revisit the lessons learned from the Korean War in order to avoid repeating the same mistake, remembering what Robert Kennedy wrote: that "The final lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis is the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes."

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