

Future of North Korea and South Korea-U.S. Alliance: Adjusting to Emerging Realities

Victor Cha*

* The author is Senior Adviser and Korea Chair at CSIS and a professor at Georgetown University. He was U.S. Deputy head of Delegation for the Six Party talks and served on the National Security Council (2004-7).

It is increasingly clear to most that true denuclearization will not be achieved under the Kim Jong-il regime. Attempts to negotiate these weapons away from the Kim family have gone back arguably over 24 years to the George H.W. Bush administration to no avail. The North Koreans appear intent on remaining a nuclear weapons state. This is their endgame and Pyongyang has been pretty damn good at staying the course despite bumps in the road. Adjusting to this emerging reality means answering some tough questions.

How credible is America's nuclear umbrella? Clearly, the fact that the Lee administration saw it as critical to extract a written statement in the joint communiqué of the June 2009 summit reaffirming the U.S. nuclear umbrella speaks more to latent concerns in Seoul than it does to the strength of the guarantee. The key clause read:

“The Alliance is adapting to changes in the 21st Century security environment. We will maintain a robust defense posture, backed by allied capabilities which support both nations' security interests. The continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, reinforces this assurance.”¹

This extended nuclear deterrent commitment rarely needed to be explicitly stated during the cold war when everyone knew it was solid and credible – in this regard, its restatement may reflect greater uncertainty rather than certainty in the light of North

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http://english.president.go.kr/pre_activity/latest/latest_view.php?uno=1393&board_no=E02&search_key=&search_value=&search_cate_code=&cur_page_no=1

Korea's deliberate steps at becoming a nuclear weapons state. Any such concerns largely stem from the calculation that the United States in fulfilling its nuclear umbrella commitment to its ally would simply not be willing to trade Honolulu for Seoul, to put it bluntly, if a crisis evolved to the point of a nuclear exchange. Such fears on the Korean part are both natural and structural. They are structural in the sense that the end of the cold war removed the broader imperative of embedding every regional conflict in the context of a larger superpower competition.

The United States has tried to address these concerns. Immediately after both of North Korea's nuclear tests in 2006 and in 2009, the Bush and Obama administrations dispatched high-level envoys to South Korea and Japan for the purpose of making public and private statements of assurance about the strength of the American nuclear umbrella. As one former U.S. defense official once said at a public forum in Washington D.C., - how can we take an alliance, which was built for a cold war-era conventional threat, and revise it to deal with a nuclear weapons state on the other side of the DMZ?

Implementation of the presidential commitment to strengthen deterrence requires answers to some very difficult questions for both the ROK and the United States. Many of these questions are politically explosive and therefore not easily broached between the two sides. For example, is deterrence made stronger through the reintroduction of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula? Is it made stronger by increasing ROK capabilities? Is it made stronger by an explicit agreement regarding the range of contingencies under which Seoul would consent to the use of nuclear weapons by the United States on North Korea (i.e., the Korean peninsula)? Do such contingencies also include nuclear use in response to bio-chem attacks by the North or only in the event of nuclear attacks? Would such contingencies also include Seoul's consent to U.S. nuclear use on the peninsula in response to a North Korean nuclear or bio-chem attack on Japan? This sampling of questions shows how difficult the issues become when we think about strengthening the nuclear umbrella.

In the end, I believe that U.S. extended nuclear deterrent commitments are still credible in the face of North Korea's nuclear tests. The alliance over fifty years has been

good at deterrence – whether this has been deterring a conventional attack by the North or a nuclear one. The alliance is also very good at punishing North Korean acts of defiance, through the use of sanctions, financial measures, and counterproliferation. Arguably, we are also good at rewarding North Korea through Six Party talks and other forms of diplomacy. But the one aspect of deterrence that the alliance is still not very good at is deterring further North Korean missile and nuclear demonstrations or tests. Aside from missile defense, there is no specific measure that we can undertake within the context of the alliance to deter a third North Korean nuclear test.

Finally, if nuclear weapons is Pyongyang's endgame, then what should be ours? The stated endgame for the Six Party talks is denuclearization. This should continue to be the case. But the true endgame for denuclearization, which can never be stated officially but should drive our thinking, is unification. That is, we shall never achieve a verifiable and irreversible end to the North's nuclear menace until we have a reunified peninsula, free and at peace. Many of the old counterarguments about regional opposition to this outcome have been overtaken by events. Japan fears a nuclear North Korea more than a democratically unified peninsula. After Kim's second nuclear test, China is realizing that its future on the peninsula, economically and politically, is with Seoul while Pyongyang grows into an increasingly uncontrollable liability. And South Korea for the first time agreed to put in the June 2009 US-ROK summit statement that the objective of the alliance is "peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy." The notion that a united Korea under the South would want to inherit the North's decrepit nuclear weapons is misinformed and unrealistic. As the 11th largest economy in the world and OECD member, South Korea would not risk international isolation to keep some old weapons. Even if they wanted to, they could make better ones than keep Kim's.

How do we get to this outcome? The Lee Myung-bak government has had a discussion with the United States about how to respond to potential instability scenarios in the North. Given concerns about the Dear Leader's health and a quicker-than-expected leadership transition to one of his ill-equipped sons, this sort of discussion makes sense.

The next step is to broaden this discussion to include China. Such a conversation must happen below the radar screen, but must be a genuine one aimed at addressing everyone's perceived vulnerabilities if things crumble in Pyongyang. Indeed, if properly discussed in advance, there are positive sum gains for all. Critics say the non-starter for China is a unified peninsula with US forces stationed north of the 38th parallel. But the argument for keeping US troops in Korea with reunification will become weaker not stronger once the northern menace is gone.

This endgame does not preclude the need for diplomacy. The Six Party talks (and it should be Six Party, not just bilateral in order to keep the regional consensus in place) still serves as a tool for managing the problem, aiming at achieving interim agreements that cap and freeze the North's programs. A frozen program after all is better than a runaway one. The counterproliferation sanctions following from the Security Council resolution 1874 need to be kept in place for two reasons. First, they are part of the diplomacy, albeit coercive diplomacy, that keeps the North at the table. Second, these sanctions are not bargaining chips to trade for incremental agreements, they are designed to prevent future proliferation. Far from airtight, they are the best tools we have had thus far (backed by the UN) to contain the threat and as long as one nuclear weapon remains in the North, they need to be continued. The stated goal of these negotiations should, of course, remain denuclearization, but the real endgame is something much bigger for the future peace and prosperity of Asia and the United States.

The Obama administration is quite well-positioned to execute this plan precisely because it has none of the baggage of the Bush administration. If Bush had even mentioned the word "unification" to other Six Party leaders, it would have sent them running in the opposite direction fearing a neocon conspiracy to effect regime change a la Iraq (contrary to the popular view, the administration never raised unification or regime change as an actionable policy option in Six Party talks or bilaterally). Because of the North's bad behavior and Obama's early rhetoric extending an open hand to rogue regimes like North Korea, his advantage is that he can talk about human rights abuses, sanctions, and unification and be seen as responsible rather than radical. This advantage



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however is momentary. For once, the US should act on it and no longer be the demandeur. #####