

Circling the square of nuclear extended deterrence in Northeast Asia

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[Dhanapala](#) argues that a Northeast Asian (NEA) NWFZ is incompatible with nuclear extended deterrence, and rejects a transitional period in which states comply fully with a NWFZ treaty.

He argues that the DPRK won't disarm until the United States stops projecting nuclear threat against it. And, until Korea and Japan stop relying on US nuclear deterrence to deter any state from threatening them with attack, nuclear or conventional, then a NEA-NWFZ is impossible. Thus, he damns as casuistical [Halperin's argument](#) for a flexible zone that recognizes residual nuclear extended deterrence.

In reality, the US sword of extended nuclear deterrence is largely sheathed or, as Patrick Morgan puts it, "[recessed](#)." The chances that the United States would use nuclear weapons against North Korea are remote—even if the latter used them first.

The issue of nuclear extended deterrence can be very tricky. One should not assume that the United States is its sole practitioner. The China-DPRK security treaty, for example, states:

"In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance *by all means* at its disposal." (my emphasis)

China declares that it will never be the first to use nuclear weapons. But should China or the DPRK

be attacked with nuclear weapons, then “all means” may come into play, either as threat or as reality. If the United States were to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for DPRK first use, for example, Chinese doctrine is ambiguous, as would be the DPRK’s in a Taiwan Straits crisis.

Chinese analysts argue that China does not extend nuclear deterrence. However, nuclear threat derives as much from possession of weapons as it does from declaratory doctrine. To not recognize this threat is as specious as ignoring the potency of the American strategic nuclear arsenal.

Moreover, during the Cold War, then non-nuclear North Korea [often invoked the prospect of nuclear retaliation](#) against the United States. For all their nuclear *juche* rhetoric today, the DPRK extended to itself another state’s nuclear deterrence when convenient. Now, it projects its [own form](#) of extreme nuclear threat rhetoric.

This slew of cross-cutting nuclear threats is complex and unpredictable. In his 1982 [dissertation](#) on generalized nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia, John On-fat Wong suggested that arming all states with nuclear weapons would lead not to a stable deterrence matrix—a permanent state of multi-directional nuclear threat projected by each against all—but rather, to a condition of “mutual probable destruction.”

It is sobering that a diplomat of Dhanapala’s experience avers that a NWFZ in Northeast Asia must be born complete and wholly free of nuclear threat, or not at all.

It is impossible to square the circle all at once. Perhaps the circle of nuclear deterrence may be squared instead by a sequence of carefully crafted compromises that create a full-fledged NWFZ slowly, by incremental steps.

—[Peter Hayes](#), NAPSNet Contributor

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org