Loose Lips Sink Ships

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Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes evaluates the plausibility South Korea attaining nuclear weapons, either through the development of a domestic nuclear program or though the deployment of weapons from the United States. Hayes reviews recent calls from US Representative Trent Franks and the Saenuri Party's Chung Mong-joon to arm South Korea with nuclear weapons and concludes that, "Indeed, to the extent that they inflame an already tense situation in Korea, these statements recall an old adage with particular resonance to South Koreans still living with the loss of the ship *Cheonan* and its

crew, viz: “Loose Lips Sink Ships.”"

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II. Report

"Loose Lips Sink Ships"
by Peter Hayes

US Rep. Trent Franks and his fellow Republicans on the US House Armed Services Committee tried to throw a cat among the pigeons on May 11, 2012 by amending a defense authorization bill to require the Pentagon to consider US options to redeploy “non-strategic” (that is, tactical and theater) nuclear weapons (plus some extra conventional forces for good measure) in the Asia-Pacific region—apparently with Korea in mind. [1]

The ostensible reason for such redeployment is to pressure China to reduce its support for nuclear-armed North Korea, and to strengthen US alliances facing the North Korean nuclear threat.

"It's become time for us as a nation to look to our deterrent and our ability to take care of ourselves and work with our allies to do everything we can to deter and to be able to defend ourselves against any future belligerence or threats from North Korea," said Franks.

However, this cat was dead even before it hit the ground. Not only did the Administration announce on May 16 that it had no plans to redeploy nuclear weapons, this not being necessary to defend US allies against North Korea’s conventional or nuclear threat, but South Korean officials and its “guided” media also rejected the idea as provocative and needless.[2]

Nonetheless, the amendment was followed on June 4 by the ruling Saenuri Party’s Chung Mong-joon’s announcement that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons to match North Korea’s nuclear threat. Said Chung, “Even if (South Korea) doesn’t possess its own nuclear weapons immediately, it should secure the capability to possess them.”[3]

Ironically, Chung also pledged to reconsider South Korea`s plan to take back wartime operational command of its forces in 2015 from the US — apparently unaware of the complications that would result from American command of Korean troops armed with indigenous nuclear weapons—a nightmare that no American president could countenance.

These statements appear to have been prompted by North Korea’s nuclear rhetoric, combined with frustration about China’s backing of the new Kim Jong Un regime. But these emotional reactions are simply out of touch with political and military realities. Let’s evaluate their soundness, leaving aside the question of whether these are simply political stunts aimed at domestic constituencies.

First, Franks is unclear on US tactical nuclear weapons themselves. The only tactical nuclear weapons remaining in the US arsenal are 200 odd air-gravity B-61 bombs deployed in NATO countries and they have no conceivable military use.[4] No one believes that the US is about to make new nuclear weapons, let alone tactical nuclear weapons. Does Franks mean to move these B-61

bombs to South Korea?

Franks is also apparently unaware that the last time the US deployed nuclear weapons, a significant fraction of US Forces in Korea were dedicated to securing and handling the weapons.[5] He seems ignorant of the fact that the US Army led the bureaucratic push inside the Pentagon to remove the weapons because they were militarily useless and a distraction from the primary mission—to deter and defeat North Korean forces. In addition to the personnel, nuclear weapons in Korea would necessitate constructing new shelters and security perimeters. Franks is silent on how many millions of dollars this would divert from the conventional military budget to actually defend the South.

He seems to forget that in the good old days of planning for nuclear war in Korea, from about 1960 to about 1990, US nuclear war plans would have resulted in the release of vast quantities of radioactive debris that would have wafted downwind towards large populations of the very Koreans we are defending.[6]

He seems to be uninformed that redeploying nuclear weapons would entail sharing such weapons or related knowledge and that would require Congress to pass a nuclear Program of Cooperation under the US Atomic Energy Act, without which the deployment would be illegal.[7] Congress is unlikely to even consider such a move.

He also seems to misunderstand China's views of the peril posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons, including the possibility that they are aimed at China as well as the US and its allies. He doesn't understand Beijing's view that China has little credible power to force North Korea to capitulate to US demands, and even less ability to deliver a United States willing to negotiate with the North on terms acceptable to Pyongyang, not least because of congressional resistance from members like Franks.

Finally, Franks seems unaware that a Republican president removed the weapons in 1991 for all these reasons and more—their presence in South Korea sent the wrong message: that nuclear weapons in Korea were necessary to defend Korea.

When they were removed, the sky did not fall in. In fact, after this unilateral US action to reshape the geo-strategic environment in East Asia, rapid progress was made on many fronts in negotiating a North Korean nuclear freeze, which kept the North's proliferation campaign in slow motion and ensured that Pyongyang's arsenal is militarily useless today, rather than a well-tested, relatively large nuclear force like that of Pakistan or India acquired over similar time frames.

As to Chung Mong-joon, like Trent Franks, he seems to be a throwback to the Cold War. The last time South Korea tried to develop an independent nuclear force, under President Park Chung Hee from 1969-80, the net result was enduring damage to the US-South Korea alliance. As Professor Chung-in Moon and I wrote in 2011 of today's South Korean nuclear weapons proponents, "If successful, they would enter the same *cul de sac* as Park—with the additional risk of prompting an inter-Korean nuclear arms race and an unstable nuclear standoff with North Korea constantly tilting towards pre-emption on both sides." [8]

Likely outcomes include possible rupture of the South Korean security alliance with the US, international sanctions, diplomatic setbacks, trade losses, possible follow-on effects on Japan's non-nuclear commitments, extraordinarily dangerous nuclear threat exchanges with North Korea and possible targeting of South Korean cities by China and Russia.

Ironically, the American military are pushing their Korean counterparts to articulate a non-nuclear

and conventional deterrent strategy that is “proactive” without being provocative. They constantly explain to South Korean Ministry of National Defense and security officials, especially in the Extended Deterrence Committee, that the US has their back and that use of nuclear weapons is a remote and improbable contingency in any conceivable war in Korea — including a nuclear war.

Without getting into the finer details, it is well understood by military planners and analysts alike that it would be enormously difficult to use nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula without entailing great risk to the Korea civilian population. It is an untenable response. [9]

Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that it’s actually quite hard to use nuclear weapons in Korea today for two reasons.

The first is that North Korea’s nuclear devices are useless. The first nuclear test was a dud, the second worked; a third test has indeterminate probability. Relatedly, the DPRK has no reliable means of delivery for their crude nuclear devices. Their missiles are unreliable, their aircraft of inferior quality, and their ability to move a ship into Korean waters in wartime would be constrained, to put it mildly. An optimistic 50 percent warhead reliability times an optimistic 50 percent delivery reliability equals a 25 percent mission reliability—at best. No commander is going to launch a war with such an unreliable nuclear systems.

The one place Kim Jong Un knows he can blow up if he fires enough nuclear devices is…North Korea. Their sole plausible nuclear option is to pre-deploy their nuclear devices in holes in the invasion corridors north of the Demilitarized Zone, to fire either as warning shots before a war to slow the pace of escalation; or during a war to create impassable craters in narrow defiles.

Why US or ROK forces would put themselves at risk from such use during a war is unclear, but at least the potential modality of use —blowing up North Korean real estate--is credible, albeit still of low reliability.

Why does the DPRK have such a primitive and unusable capacity? In large part, because of the US-led campaign to slow its proliferation over the last two decades! Deploying US or ROK nuclear weapons would legitimate the DPRK’s development and deployment of improved weapons, and would accelerate their capacity—leading to a less secure ROK and region.

The second reason it is hard to start a nuclear war in Korea today is because American nuclear weapons are now recessed and reserved for only the most extreme, existential crises, both for Americans and for US allies. Sea-launched cruise missiles will be removed from US submarines in 2013 and were already home-stored rather than forward-deployed for immediate response in a crisis. Almost certainly, a war with the DPRK would move extremely fast—not least because the DPRK has less than a month of fuel to operate its military in a war. Using intercontinental ballistic missiles from the US mainland to hit North Korea requires firing them over Russia. Russia is unlikely to agree to such an attack, and the US president would have to consult with the Kremlin first because the Russians have no early warning radar in the Far East able to reassure them that the attack (which would be announced at liftoff within seconds by the twittering public in the United States) is not aimed at Russia.

Similarly, missiles launched from submarines in the mid-Pacific would fly at right angles to China which also lacks early warning radars looking eastwards. They too would have to assume that missiles aimed at North Korea could be headed towards China, and could respond in ways that would be extraordinarily dangerous in relation to the Taiwan Straits, and towards US forces in Korea and Japan mobilizing to respond to North Korea’s military forces.

More realistically, the United States could send a shuttle service of long range bombers firing nuclear-tipped air-launched cruise missiles at North Korea, a slow motion nuclear attack. This response would be too little, too late to affect a North Korean military campaign, and would only inflame North Korean resistance and create dissent and division in South Korea in the midst of a war—not to mention the impact on US allies who would be called to arms in a second Korean war.

In short, the politically and militarily proportionate and meaningful response to North Korea's military threat, including its barbaric nuclear threats [10] and even its possible first use of nuclear weapons, is to prosecute a prompt, massive conventional military campaign to remove the leadership.

By contrast, calling for the re-deployment of nuclear weapons or the development of South Korean nuclear weapons is to face an uncertain future looking backwards, not a forward-looking, potent call-to-arms in the 21st century.

Indeed, to the extent that they inflame an already tense situation in Korea, these statements recall an old adage with particular resonance to South Koreans still living with the loss of the ship *Cheonan* and its crew, viz: "Loose Lips Sink Ships."

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

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