

Policy Forum 10-028: Nuclear Posture Review and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula



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Recommended Citation

Hyun-Wook Kim, "Policy Forum 10-028: Nuclear Posture Review and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula", NAPSNet Policy Forum, May 17, 2010, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nuclear-posture-review-and-its-implications-on-the-korean-peninsula/>

Nuclear Posture Review and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula

Policy Forum Online 10-028A: May 17, 2010

By Hyun-Wook Kim

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I. Introduction

Hyun-Wook Kim, Professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) in South Korea, writes, "It is important for both the U.S. and South Korea to develop a concrete plan for extended deterrence... Tailored extended deterrence should be established separately for Korea and

Japan, covering not only nuclear elements but also diverse military, economic, political and legal elements that would produce more comprehensive extended deterrence measures."

This report was produced for the May 2010 newsletter of The Asia Foundation's Center for U.S.-Korea Policy. If you are interested in receiving the newsletter to request to be added to the e-mail list at info@centerforuskoreapolicy.org

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II. Article by Hyun-Wook Kim

- "Nuclear Posture Review and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula"

By Hyun-Wook Kim

Since his inauguration, President Obama has placed substantial emphasis on pushing forward non-proliferation and counter-terrorism. His overall nuclear policy consists of three components: non-proliferation, disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. This policy was first laid out in President Obama's Prague speech on April 5, 2009, and further developed in the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). These policy adjustments have direct implications for South Korea as a country that is facing an expanded nuclear threat as a result of North Korea's nuclear development.

The 2010 NPR pointed out nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation as today's most immediate and extreme threats, and stressed the need to maintain stable strategic relationships with existing nuclear states such as China and Russia. The NPR emphasizes the concept of negative security assurance: the U.S. declared that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations. This implies that any state that uses chemical and biological weapons (CBW) rather than nuclear weapons against the U.S. or its allies and partners would face the prospect of a devastating conventional military response rather than being punished with nuclear weapons. However, the U.S. has also declared that it reserves the right to employ nuclear weapons to deter a conventional or CBW attack against the U.S. or its allies and partners by states that possess nuclear weapons or those not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

The NPR has two implications on the Korean peninsula. First, outlier countries such as North Korea and Iran that have violated their NPT obligations and continued to pursue nuclear weapons have been excluded from the negative security assurance. Therefore, there is high possibility that North Korea might refer to such provisions found in the NPR to justify its position of possessing nuclear weapons, while continuing to argue that the U.S. must abandon its hostile policy toward Pyongyang. In response to the NPR, North Korea's Foreign Ministry announced its plan to further increase and modernize its nuclear deterrent as long as the U.S. continues to pose a security threat to the North. Thus, the 2010 NPR could have the effect of further holding back North Korea from returning to the six-party process and also raises the possibility of reopening discussions, before North Korea's return to Six-Party Talks, on U.S.-DP RK normalization or on a peace regime.

The NPR states that U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the U.S. or its allies, which implies the possibility of a U.S. preemptive strike against North Korea. This clearly illustrates the Obama government's rejection of the No First Use policy, which is an irritant to the North. In order to persuade Pyongyang to return to the six-party process, the U.S. should pose its policies more flexibly, even though its strategies should consistently

emphasize dialogue and sanctions. Also, the NPR states that the United States will use nuclear weapons only to protect the vital interests of the U.S. or its allies, but it is not clear what those vital interests are. It is essential for Washington to clearly specify those interests to maintain a favorable position in negotiating with North Korea.

Second, the 2010 NPR indicates that although a U.S. "nuclear umbrella" is provided by a combination of the strategic forces of the U.S. Triad, non-strategic nuclear weapons deployed forward in key regions, and U.S.-based nuclear weapons, many of these weapons were removed at the end of the Cold War. Instead, the U.S. has developed missile defense (MD), counter-weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities, conventional power-projection capabilities, and integrated command and control as its main tools for enhancing regional security. While continuing to maintain nuclear deterrence, the United States seeks to strengthen its regional deterrence capability through MD or conventional long-range missiles. Such a possibility raises the concern that U.S. deterrence capability achieved with nuclear weapons could be weakened, including U.S. extended deterrence capabilities provided to South Korea.

South Korean concerns over U.S. extended deterrence pertain to the planned transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) scheduled for 2012. The possible weakening of U.S. nuclear extended deterrence as suggested in the NPR could mean a decline in U.S. defense support to South Korea, and in turn a weaker defense capability of the ROK vis-à-vis North Korea. Furthermore, the uncertain number of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula associated with strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) would signal a weakening of defense capability to the Korean people.

Concerning MD, South Korea is currently developing Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) and is not participating in the U.S.-centered MD system. South Korea considers that joining the U.S. MD system might provoke North Korea and worsen South Korea's relationship with China. Japan, on the other hand, is partially included in the U.S. MD system. Such a situation leaves open the logical possibility that U.S. troops stationed in Japan might be more effective in deterring North Korea than the U.S.-ROK alliance.

It is important for both the U.S. and South Korea to develop a concrete plan for extended deterrence. The U.S. clearly stated in the 2010 NPR its commitment to provide "a credible extended deterrence posture and capabilities" not only through nuclear weapons but also through conventional military forces and MD. A tailored deterrence capability should be established between the U.S. and Korea, a process through which both sides could ascertain that the new extended deterrence does not imply a weakening U.S. nuclear umbrella but a new strategy for more efficient deterrence. One important part of this strategy would be to establish an integrated operation system by strengthening interoperability between KAMD and the U.S. MD system. Tailored extended deterrence should be established separately for Korea and Japan, covering not only nuclear elements but also diverse military, economic, political and legal elements that would produce more comprehensive extended deterrence measures.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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