

Policy Forum 10-023: Nuclear Posture Review and North Korea

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Nuclear Posture Review and North Korea

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By Wooksik Cheong

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I. Introduction

Wooksik Cheong, representative of the Korea Peace Network, writes, "The Obama administration has offered 'carrots' along with 'sticks' when it comes to North Korea. It has implied that the US will offer 'negative security assurance' only if North Korea lets go of its nuclear weapons and returns to the NPT. It is understood to be somewhat unfair for both sides under an armistice situation, when the only assurance of security is conditional on abandoning nuclear weapons first. From this point of view, it seems a strong probability that North Korea will expand its nuclear arsenal."

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II. Article by Wooksik Cheong

- "Nuclear Posture Review and North Korea"

By Wooksik Cheong

The most significant component of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which the Obama administration released on April 6th, was the announcement that the United States will maintain the option of nuclear preemptive attack on North Korea and Iran. The NPR declares "the United States 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 nonproliferation obligations."

Accordingly, North Korea, which has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and conducted two nuclear tests, and Iran, which has recently garnered the world's attention as a violator of the treaty, remain potential targets of US preemptive attack. In other words, it is possible that the United States will take nuclear retaliation toward these countries if they attack the US or US allies and partners with conventional, biological or chemical weapons.

Labeling North Korea and Iran as "outliers" in an interview with New York Times on April 5th, President Obama made it clear that North Korea and Iran-in current situation-will be excluded from the 'Negative Security Assurance' afforded to NPT compliant nations. US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates presented the NPR the next day and clarified the US position on nuclear preemptive attacks on North Korea or Iran, stating that all options are on the table regarding these nations.

The Obama administration, with this the new nuclear strategy, intends to warn North Korea and Iran by retaining the nuclear preemptive attack option left over from the Cold War. This posture aims to force North Korea and Iran to abandon nuclear development and comply with Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. Otherwise, they need to be prepared to endure "all options" the United States has available to it, including nuclear preemptive attack.

North Korea: No More Expectations of Obama?

As far as the Obama administration's policy is concerned, the North Korean nuclear issue is one of its main concerns. North Korea claims its nuclear weapons are meant for "nuclear deterrence." In light of this, it is possible for North Korea to claim its "nuclear deterrence" is needed under the pretext of nuclear threat from the United States. In this way, North Korea is very likely to justify its need for "nuclear deterrence" and to criticize Obama's maintaining of the United States' option of preemptive attack. Furthermore, proponents of nuclear armament and military authorities in North Korea are likely to use this threat to strengthen their position.

Of serious concern is the possibility that North Korea will give up expectations of the Obama administration. After President Obama took office, North Korea expected improvement of the relations between the North and the United States. However, Obama's hard-line policies have made it difficult for North Korea to anticipate a better situation. These hard policies include the Obama administration's public remark on the 5029 Concept Plan (or operation plan), the US-South Korea joint military exercise "Key Resolve", referring North Korea's satellite launch to the UN Security Council, sustaining sanctions on North Korea, and refusing bilateral talks. Moreover, North Korea's

distrust is expected to increase dramatically and even reach a breaking point regarding the option of a nuclear preemptive strike against the US.

This deteriorating situation is expected to weaken the possibility of the resumption of the Six Party Talks. Additionally the sinking of a South Korean Navy ship has complicated the dispute with North Korea. With the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement with Russia and the release of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the Obama administration has demonstrated a great diplomatic confidence in nuclear nonproliferation. Based on this, it is needless to say that North Korea and Iran are expected to receive harsh criticism during the 'Nuclear Security Summit' which is scheduled to be held on April 12th and 13th in Washington DC, and during the NPT meeting in May.

On the basis of this, Washington is moving towards the hard line policy with regards to North Korea and Iran. 'Tough and direct diplomacy' was one of Obama's commitments during the Presidential election to resolve North Korea and Iran's nuclear issues. However he is now focusing on pressure and sanctions. The change in Obama's actions is believed to support the strengthening of the NPT by showing a strong will to punish those states that abandon or violate the treaty.

Isn't this the violation of 9.19 Joint Statement?

It is possible to say that Obama's option to stage a nuclear preemptive strike against North Korea violates the 2005 September Joint Statement. Since North Korea not only abandoned the NPT in 2003, but also declared its possession of nuclear weapons in February 2005 and executed a nuclear test in May 2009, the United States excluded North Korea from the 'negative security assurance', which declared the US will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. The problem is that the US strategy can be seen as a violation of the Joint Statement of the six party talks that requires North Korea to have "complete and thorough implementation". This includes the statement that "the United States affirmed that it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with nuclear or conventional weapons". However, this Joint Statement had been agreed to after North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT. Therefore, it can be said that the US administration's maintaining the option of nuclear preemptive attack toward North Korea is a violation.

It could be argued that North Korea has to be considered an exception to the United States' 'negative security assurance' since North Korea conducted nuclear weapons tests twice. However, if the US keeps the option of nuclear preemptive attack due to the North's nuclear tests, it will lead to a controversy over US policy, which does not acknowledge North Korea as a nation that possesses nuclear weapons.

It is known that the Obama administration has offered 'carrots' along with 'sticks' when it comes to North Korea. It has implied that the US will offer 'negative security assurance' only if North Korea lets go of its nuclear weapons and returns to the NPT. It is understood to be somewhat unfair for both sides under an armistice situation, when the only assurance of security is conditional on abandoning nuclear weapons first. From this point of view, it seems a strong probability that North Korea will expand its nuclear arsenal, criticizing that there's not much difference between Obama's policy and that of the former Bush administration.

Contrary to the global community's enthusiastic shout for a 'nuclear-free world', it is of serious concern that there will be increasing tensions due to 'nuclear confrontation' on the Korean peninsula.

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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