



Policy Forum 05-21A: Restore US Nukes to South Korea



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John Parker

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I. Introduction

John Parker, is a freelance writer based in Thailand, writes: "The nuclear cat is well and truly out of the bag, which means that the military option for reunification has slipped from Seoul's fingers for good; and will only be possible for Pyongyang if the US pulls out of South Korea completely without leaving any nuclear weapons behind - still a very unlikely scenario, recent force cuts notwithstanding...That leaves the other option: restore nuclear weapons to the South in full awareness that this could start an arms race which might lead to the collapse of the DPRK."

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II. Essay by John Parker

- "Restore US Nukes to South Korea"
by John Parker

It's the counter strategy that dares not speak its name: return US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.

North Korea's announcement on February 10 that it had nuclear weapons only surprised those who were not paying attention. After all, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has a history of nuclear research dating to the 1950s, and is believed to have initiated nuclear weapons development programs in the late 1970s. [1]

When the North pulled out of the 1994 Agreed Framework agreement in 2002 and ejected United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency observers from its Yongbyon nuclear complex, the regime gained unimpeded access to enough plutonium to make at least a handful of implosion warheads, and the manufacture of the actual devices has been only a matter of time.

Much of the commentary on the North Korean announcement, hypnotized by anti-American schadenfreude, has focused on the difficulties that a nuclear North Korea poses for American policymakers. What all these writers have missed is the availability of an obvious counterstrategy to a nuclear DPRK. While this strategy would admittedly be very controversial, especially in the current "if a tree falls in the forest, it's [US President] George W Bush's fault" climate, it has many advantages, including:

- It would maintain peace on the Korean peninsula by making a North Korean attack on the South basically impossible;
- It could initiate a chain of events that would lead directly to a collapse of the Kim Jong-Il regime and the peaceful reunification of Korea.

Turning back the clock to 1991

The strategy is simple: re-introduce nuclear weapons to South Korea. As drastic as such a step might seem, it would in fact be stabilizing, and hardly unprecedented. Although some readers will not realize this, several dozen tactical nuclear warheads - mainly B-61 gravity bombs - were routinely kept on secure bases in the Republic of Korea (ROK) until October 1991, when the first (president George H W) Bush administration withdrew them as part of a global withdrawal of all US ground- and sea-based tactical nuclear weapons throughout the world. (This action was one clause of an arms control treaty reached with then-Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev.)

Ostensibly, these weapons could have been used to destroy North Korean armored formations moving southward through the open plains north of Seoul. However, given the potency of conventional US and ROK anti-armor munitions and the dreadful humanitarian and political consequences of using nuclear weapons, it is actually highly doubtful they would have been used even if a war had taken place. The more sensible justification for their presence was deterrence: by making it nearly impossible for a North Korean attack to succeed, they helped to maintain the status quo on the peninsula.

Their removal in 1991 was justified both by the specific characteristics of tactical nuclear weapons and by the general logic of arms control. Tactical nukes were considered particularly risky due to their proximity to frontline areas, the greater difficulty of storing them securely (compared to, say, land- and sea-based missile forces), and the fact that a frontline commander might be tempted to use the weapons rather than be overrun by enemy forces. Also, in the arms control context, the removal of frontline nuclear weapons contributed to a reduction of tension, which then made it possible to consider reductions in strategic forces. For the record, in the circumstances of the early 1990s, this writer enthusiastically supported both the decision to withdraw tactical nukes, and arms control measures in general.

The risks of a DPRK nuclear monopoly

However, that was then, this is now; the current situation has several features that make it highly dangerous compared with the early 1990s:

- First, obviously, North Korea is now officially a nuclear-weapons state (even if certain parties that should know better still refuse to acknowledge this).
- Second, rampant anti-American sentiment in South Korea has eviscerated the ROK army's will to fight, making it dangerously vulnerable to a DPRK attack (this assertion will be controversial, but it is based on firsthand accounts from US Forces Korea - USFK- soldiers who train with ROK soldiers).
- Third, the US is overextended in Iraq and, partly because of this, has been withdrawing forces from South Korea.
- Fourth, of course, the US has been openly advocating regime change in the North, and Pyongyang leader Kim Jong-Il no doubt fears that he might be next on the list after Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

All these factors may tempt North Korea to attack the South in the belief that, if war is inevitable, they might as well get the advantage of striking first. In support of this notion, DPRK officials have explicitly said, during meetings with US officials, that "we aren't going to let you do a buildup" (referring to the first Gulf War). More shocking, North Korea's war strategy, as revealed by the high-level defector Hwang Jeong-yeop [2], is not merely to overrun the South so rapidly that reinforcement would become impossible, as is commonly believed. Rather, the DPRK's strategy is to prevent reinforcement from ever taking place by threatening to use nuclear weapons against Japan, should the US intervene (this very possibility is a major, though little-understood reason why relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang have been so frigid of late). For the DPRK, such a threat is now reasonably credible, and will become more so as the reliability of the North's missile forces improves over time. In the event of war, the North would stage a massive conventional attack, and prevent (it believes) US reinforcement of the peninsula, or use of nuclear weapons, by means of the aforementioned threat.

Would the US bow to nuclear blackmail and allow North Korea to annex the South? This is doubtful, but then, president Gerald R Ford had the forces available - on paper - to reverse North Vietnam's conventional invasion of South Vietnam in 1975, but did not use them, due to a rational calculation that the benefits of intervention were not worth the costs (political and otherwise). The North Koreans may well be making an analogous calculation today, and drawing the dangerous conclusion that an attack could succeed. If the cost to the US of sending conventional forces back into South Vietnam was too high, what about the cost of losing Los Angeles and San Francisco? Bear in mind that the missile defense system authorized by Bush is not yet operational.

Advantages of the restoration gambit

The value of reintroducing nukes to the South lies largely in that it would neutralize North Korea's likely war strategy, thus deterring any attack and maintaining peace. Pyongyang knows full well that it would face certain annihilation in a nuclear exchange with the US, and if US theater commanders had ready access to tactical nuclear weapons, this would become much more likely. If the ROK-based nuclear weapons were restored, the perilous status quo would be transformed into a mutual-assured-destruction (MAD) situation, much like the one that characterized the US/Soviet Union standoff during the Cold War. Although MAD has very real dangers, such as accidental weapons releases, these risks are surely preferable to a nuclear exchange in Northeast Asia, which becomes more likely - not less - if the DPRK is allowed to have a nuclear weapons monopoly on the peninsula.

Needless to say, certain segments of the South Korean public, especially its astoundingly gullible younger generation, would hysterically oppose any such suggestion, using the unassailable logic that "we don't like George Bush, and George Bush suggested this, so therefore we must oppose it". However, what Seoul's official reaction would be is another question entirely. Most South Korean government officials, in contrast to their naive offspring, are realistic enough to recognize that their continuance in power ultimately depends on American military protection. And historically, the ROK government has never declined to procure more powerful weapons systems when they were offered (although the US has, as a conscious policy, limited South Korean access to cutting-edge hardware; for example, the ROK has been provided with 1970s-vintage F-16 fighters, but not the current-generation F-22). President Roh Moo-hyun is known for his pacifist inclinations, but it is difficult to believe that he would refuse if Bush offered to return the B-61s (aircraft-delivered gravity bombs) to the South - especially since Kim Jong-il has helpfully provided Roh with the perfect political cover for taking such a step, and every newspaper in South Korea is loudly demanding firm action in response to the North's nuclear status.

The biggest advantage of the strategy suggested, however, is not simply that it would maintain the peace. Its biggest advantage may be that it could start an arms race that would lead directly to the collapse of the DPRK. The reason for this is simple. North Korea's Achilles' heel is obviously its economic weakness. The struggling North, chained to anachronistic Marxist dogmas that the rest of the world rejected long ago, has already bankrupted itself just to build the handful of primitive plutonium bombs that it has. Suppose Bush now says to the North, "OK, Kim Jong-il, we tried everything to get you to listen to reason on your nuclear weapons program, and you refused. Of course you cannot expect us to simply sit on our hands and accept your nuclear monopoly in Korea. So we will simply use our vast wealth to produce and transfer just enough nuclear warheads to the South to maintain a continuous 10-to-1 advantage over your pathetic arsenal. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Naturally, such a pronouncement (even if couched in diplomatic language) would inspire the usual bloodcurdling pre-adolescent hysteria from the North's media outlets. But once the spleen-venting speeches have passed, what can Kim Jong-il do to counter Bush? He would have three options, all of them bad.

- First, he could take no action, which would mean that the North would have just spent virtually its last dollar to obtain weapons from which it gained precisely no strategic advantage; in fact, its existing strategic disadvantage would only have been exacerbated. Furthermore, the introduction of nukes would have made Korean reunification under North Korean control - which has been the DPRK's sacred goal for as long as there has been a DPRK - utterly impossible. If there is ever a time when generals in the North would be tempted to overthrow the "dear leader", this would surely be the time.

- Second, the North Korean dictator could try to match the US warheads in the South by building more bombs. But this would lead to an even worse result: economic collapse. Nuclear warheads are staggeringly expensive, and the delivery systems required to send them to their targets are even more costly: ruinously so, in fact, for a country in the DPRK's economic straits. Ask yourself: if the former Soviet Union, with its vast territory and resources, could not even come close to maintaining military parity with the US, how could North Korea?
- Third, Kim might respond with threatened or actual nuclear proliferation. In my opinion, this would be a mortal error. If the US government concluded that Kim was seriously considering selling a nuclear device to a terrorist group, the Pentagon would be drawing up war plans before the day was out. As ghastly as a nuclear Korean war would be for everyone involved, if forced to choose, the US would prefer it to a nuclear September 11, 2001.

The Chinese aspect

China's possible reaction to such a policy change must be discussed, if only because it is the People's Republic of China (PRC), not the US, that truly has the ability to resolve the Korean crisis any time it wishes. China basically has two goals in Northeast Asia: to avoid another Korean War, especially a nuclear one, and to avert a nuclear arms race in the region that could result in Japan, or - God forbid - Taiwan becoming nuclear states. While China doesn't want the humiliation of having its erstwhile North Korean ally absorbed by the democratic South, that doesn't mean it wants to prop up the DPRK at the cost of losing Taiwan, and a nuclear DPRK could have precisely that result. Given these factors, China would have little to lose by accepting a return to the pre-1991 situation in Korea. A nuclear standoff on the peninsula could mean that its division would become permanent; but this means nothing to China, which enjoys good relations with both Koreas, and would prefer to save its forces for a possible war over Taiwan.

A nuclear-restoration policy wouldn't even necessarily have to be implemented in order to be useful. Just a suggestion from Bush to President Hu Jintao that such a move was being considered might be enough to spur the Chinese to useful action. And if the Chinese were slow to understand the risks to their interests that could result from the nuclear DPRK-nuclear ROK-nuclear Japan-nuclear Taiwan scenario, then Bush might hint that he was considering giving the South Koreans warheads under their own command. It would be somewhat awkward, internationally, for the Chinese to oppose even this more extreme option: after all, if China's Korean ally can have nuclear weapons, then why can't America's?

The advantage of pressuring China is that China holds the key to this crisis. And why is that? Because all Hu has to do to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis is pick up the phone.

The one-phone-call solution

All Hu would have to do is dial up Kim Jong-il and say some (more polite) version of the following: "If you don't play ball and get back to the six-party talks pronto, I'm going to announce that we are dissolving our alliance with you, that we will fully support the South in any future Korean crisis, and we'll privately tell the Americans that they are free to do as they like, while our soldiers sit on the north bank of the Yalu and roast Beijing duck on the glowing coals of your regime."

Now of course, anyone can immediately think of a hundred reasons why the Chinese could never do this - in effect, switch sides. But what they forget is that the PRC observes probably the most ruthlessly pragmatic foreign policy of any nation on earth. For every argument one could make

against China supporting the South, a rebuttal is readily at hand.

- "China wouldn't abandon its North Korean ally." Well, if doing so is in its national interest - and in this case, it is - why not? Abandoning allies is practically a tradition for the PRC: Mao Zedong snubbed the Soviet Union to meet with president Richard Nixon; Deng Xiaoping stiffed Kim Il-sung so China could do business deals with South Korea; and former president Jiang Zemin abandoned Albania (a historic friend of China) to support the Serbs during the Kosovo war.
- "The Chinese military would oppose any such step." Well, there are ways for Hu to get his generals on board. He could just say, "You know, guys, this sticks in my craw, too, but think about it. If you have to fight the United States, would you rather do it in Korea or on Taiwan? By letting the Americans take care of the North, we can solve this annoying Korean problem once and for all, and save our forces for Taiwan."
- "The US is China's strategic enemy, and China can't change sides because that would help the US." In fact, Chinese and American interests may be opposed in some cases, but are quite compatible in others - and Korea happens to be one of the areas where they are the most compatible. More importantly, as argued below, it is far from clear whether a Chinese shift in loyalty would benefit the US in the long run.

For the Chinese, the chance to avoid frittering away their military strength in another pointless Korean war isn't even the best part of aligning itself with Seoul. The best part is that changing sides would mean that the ROK will owe China a huge favor. And the PRC could ask for a lot of things to repay this debt. But what they actually will ask for - you can bet on this - is one specific thing: they will make switching sides contingent on American troops leaving a reunified Korea.

For any South Korean president, now or in the future, such a bargain would prove irresistible: if China supported the South, you could get everything you ever wanted - a reunified, democratic Korea under Seoul's control, an end to the nuclear crisis, a new source of cheap labor (namely, the underdeveloped northern provinces) to rev up the Korean economy, land transportation links with China, Russia and Europe - and in exchange, the Americans, whom you don't exactly adore anyway, have to go. One cannot imagine any ROK government that would reject such an offer. And the South Korean public? They are hopelessly infatuated with China already, and would jump at the chance to become a Chinese vassal state once again; any second thoughts ("Hey, these mainland Chinese don't exactly believe in democracy, do they?") would come too late.

For the Chinese military, the South's covert acceptance of such an offer would probably cement the bargain. Save your forces for Taiwan and get the Americans out of Korea? Quite the foreign policy coup. And once Hu made his phone call, the end of the Kim Jong-il regime would be at hand: the Chinese food aid and natural gas that has been keeping the North afloat would suddenly stop, and he would be at the mercy of his sworn enemies, the South Koreans and the Americans. True, the Dear Leader has proven himself to be a survivor; but one can't see how he would get out of this one with his regime intact. At the very least, he would have to come to terms on the nuclear issue.

'Fool's gold' for the Dear Leader

In October 2002, then-secretary of state Colin Powell observed: "No North Korean child can eat enriched uranium. No North Korean peasant is going to get a job enriching uranium. It is fool's gold for North Korea." Powell was right. Nuclear weapons are, after all, weapons, and the decision to procure any weapon should ultimately be based on whether the buyer can reasonably expect to obtain strategic advantage over its likely adversaries, or at least retain strategic parity with them.

For the DPRK, nuclear weapons will do neither, because of the readily available counter strategy described. So in fact, what the rest of the world - even Muammar Gaddafi - has been saying to the North for years is correct: "Don't go nuclear, it's not going to help you."

But this raises a question: if not for strategic advantage, why did the North proceed with its nuclear program? And there can only be one answer: for the same reason states such as Israel and South Africa did - the need for self-preservation at any cost. The North Korean regime has always had two paramount goals: self-preservation, and reunification under its own terms. When the DPRK decided, during the (US president) Bill Clinton administration, to secretly pursue uranium enrichment (contrary to popular and exceedingly ill-informed belief, this decision cannot be blamed on George Bush, simply because he was not yet president when the decision was made), it faced a fork in the road: it could attain self-preservation, but only by placing the second goal in the highest jeopardy, since reintroduction of nuclear weapons to the South, resulting in a nuclear stalemate on the peninsula, would make reunification militarily unattainable. And Kim Jong-il didn't hesitate: he chose regime survival over the hope of reunification.

This is what is so ironic about the doltish reaction of some South Korean youth to the North's nuclear program, who cheered the North's warheads on the grounds that "they are Korean": by going nuclear, Kim Jong-il made a mockery of the DPRK's entire ideology, which holds that reunification is the highest goal of the nation. Kim's warheads prove, once and for all, that his highest goal is to continue holding disturbingly inappropriate film festivals, eating authentic Italian pizza [3], and fondling abducted South Korean movie actresses, while outside his charmed circle, the desperate population scrapes for roots and berries to survive.

'Two kingdoms' forever?

After almost 60 years of division, Korea now finds itself at a crucial watershed. The nuclear cat is well and truly out of the bag, which means that the military option for reunification has slipped from Seoul's fingers for good; and will only be possible for Pyongyang if the US pulls out of South Korea completely without leaving any nuclear weapons behind - still a very unlikely scenario, recent force cuts notwithstanding. That leaves two options for reunification: a negotiated settlement; and the end-of-the-Soviet Union scenario outlined earlier. Regarding the first option, one would like to believe that a negotiated confederation of some type is possible, but in the entire history of Korea, no government has peacefully given up its sovereignty.

That leaves the other option: restore nuclear weapons to the South in full awareness that this could start an arms race which might lead to the collapse of the DPRK. One doubts that the ROK government has the stomach to actually go ahead with this. But who knows? If the alternative is to accept a divided Korea until the end of time, shouldn't any true Korean patriot be willing to at least consider it?

Notes

[1] Skeptical readers can refer to Alexandre Mansourov's definitive article, published in 1995 in the Nonproliferation Review: <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/npr/vol02/23/mansou23.pdf> .

[2] See excerpts <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/whang1.htm>

[3] See I made pizza for Kim Jong-il <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/DK23Dg01.html>

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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