Shaping the Strategic Environment Not Bad Behaviors

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At the Asan Institute Nuclear Forum 2013, I argued that US vital interests in the region mostly don't revolve around the DPRK. Therefore, the US should establish a framework that addresses primarily the nuclear insecurities of the five parties, not the DPRK, as the first priority.

The main game is to reduce the risk of Taiwan Strait-induced US or PRC nuclear first-use, and to moderate Sino-Japanese conflict and the potential for Japanese and ROK nuclear weapons. Only a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) can manage the cross-cutting nuclear insecurities of states in this region. A Northeast Asian NWFZ requires:

- Termination of the state of war;
- Creation of a permanent council on security to monitor the agreement
- Mutual declaration of no hostile intent;
- Provisions of assistance for nuclear and other energy;
- Termination of sanctions.

Would the North Koreans find valuable a multilateral, legally binding guarantee that they won't be attacked with nuclear weapons? We don't know. They have consistently said it's one of their most important issues. That may have shifted now that they declared themselves "forever nuclear-armed." Talking to them is the only one way to find out.

If they say no, then the US should ignore them and proceed, because a regional NWFZ is in its interests anyway. The US should not give veto power to the DPRK. The US should focus on shaping the regional environment, not bad behaviors.

If they say yes, then the US should make room in the NWFZ for them to enter, either at the outset, or over time. Yes, it can be verified, even in the DPRK.

It's perfectly feasible for the US to make a guarantee to NPT-Non-Nuclear Weapons States [NNWSs] in the region in a NWFZ, including the DPRK should it disarm and comply with its NPT-IAEA obligations, that it won't use nuclear weapons against the DPRK. Ditto for the other Nuclear Weapons States [NWSs].

Residual nuclear extended deterrence will still exist for the ROK and Japan, only rhetoric and legal form will realign (at last) with the restructured US nuclear forces that no longer include any form of forward-deployed theater or tactical nuclear weapons.

That's good–it's the essence of credibility that this alignment exist, and it's currently badly out of whack, which affects the perceptions (negatively) of US adversaries, allies, and third parties. Meanwhile, nuclear deterrence would continue to flow "around" the NWFZ between the NWSs, and between them and the DPRK while it is nuclear-armed.

Should a NWSs or nuclear-armed state (DPRK) use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against a NNWS, then it would face residual nuclear extended deterrence; and render moot NWS' guarantees to not use nuclear weapons in or against the Zone parties.

This approach is tough on the North Koreans, unlike the current US policy of strategic drift, which is soft on the North Koreans.

It proffers a diplomatic and geostrategic concert with China, the badly needed but missing flip side of the military-led US pivot in the region.

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