Tactically Smart, Strategically Stupid: Simulated B52 Nuclear Bombings in Korea

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Introduction

Peter Hayes states, "Deploying nuclear capable bombers accompanied by nuclear threat rhetoric will not quell regressive proliferation sentiment in Seoul. Nor will it persuade North Korea's leaders to desist from nuclear aggression.....quiet actions will always speak louder in Pyongyang than aggressive words."

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I have written articles headed "tactically smart, strategically stupid" only twice before.

The first was in mid-1994, when North Korea pulled fuel rods out of its research reactor after evicting the IAEA inspectors. This action put the DPRK and the US in a free fall towards war. I wrote an essay in Sisa Journal (in Korean) explaining why this tactical move was a grave strategic error by the North Koreans. Piqued, the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs blackballed me for years, making it impossible to travel to Pyongyang. This broke my heart.
The second was in November 2002. This time, I attacked the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization's decision to suspend heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea until it took "concrete and credible actions to dismantle completely its highly-enriched uranium program."(1) This put pressure on North Korea to fast track its nuclear weapons program rather than to bring it into compliance with its NPT and IAEA safeguards obligations. Thereby, the Bush Administration accelerated North Korean proliferation propensity and activity.
Today is the third time occasion over more than two decades that I have felt obliged to use this title. This time, it is in response to the reported (2) March 8, 2013 flights of B-52 bombers conducting simulated nuclear bombings of North Korea (3).

Perhaps this deployment was intended to dampen ROK demands for independent nuclear weapons in regressive political circles (4), and to reinforce South Korean perceptions of the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent extended via the US-ROK alliance.

Perhaps it was to make clear American resolve, should the DPRK use nuclear weapons, to reduce North Korea to a smoking radiating ruin.

Unfortunately, B52s resonate in a very particular frequency in the North Korean mind. The harmonic is 1976, August to be precise. This was the month of the poplar tree crisis at Panmunjon.

On August 18, 1976, the US military decided to remove a poplar tree in the Joint Security Area in the Demilitarized Zone that was blocking the northward view (5). As a team of US and ROK soldiers began to cut the tree, they were attacked by North Korean soldiers. In the melee, two Americans were killed, bludgeoned by axe handles. On August 20, US Forces Korea mounted Operation Paul Bunyan, backed by mobilized forces across the entire Peninsula, including the movement forward of tactical nuclear weapons (6). Then US Commander in Korea General Richard Stillwell had pre-

delegated authority to use artillery to bombard a barracks north of the DMZ should the DPRK respond to the task force. In fact, not long after the tree was cut down, the North Koreans fired on a US helicopter flying over the DMZ and hit it—a casus belli if Stillwell had chosen to act on it.

He didn't. For the next month, the United States sent flights of B52 bombers up the Korean Peninsula, veering off at the last moment. This, I was told by a US intelligence serving at the time, "scared the living shit out of them."(7) Henry Kissinger noted at the time that this huge show of force was to "overawe" the North Koreans (8). "I have never seen the North Koreans so scared," Kissinger commented on August 26, 1976 (9).

Was it tactically smart to remind the North Koreans of this defining moment? It will surely get their attention (10) and in fact, may induce them to put their forces onto high alert, mobilize the population, and justify preparations for attack and all-out war, including nuclear attack. It may persuade them that the situation is so serious that it could spiral out of control. From this, they might conclude that North Korea should desist henceforth from issuing extraordinary nuclear threat rhetoric aimed at the US, South Korean, and even China. They could even decide that further provocations against South Korea are to be avoided at all costs.

Maybe sending in the B52s was tactically smart and this happy logic will unfold.

Maybe: but far more likely is that it was strategically stupid to force North Koreans to relive August 1976. Because it will surely, 100 percent guaranteed, justify in North Korean minds that they could be attacked any moment by US nuclear weapons and that the only way, short of reconstituting their hostile relationship with Washington, to reduce the risk of nuclear attack is to pose a similar threat to the United States and its allies, and until it has developed and demonstrated that ability, substitute threat rhetoric and risk-taking for capacity.
In short, the simulated B52 nuclear bombings will encourage North Koreans that they should double, triple, quadruple their efforts to acquire a reliable, militarily meaningful ability to deliver nuclear attacks on external targets—currently still a distant prospect.

In September 1991, I met in Pyongyang with then Major General Kim Yong Chol, Director, General Staff Committee of the Korean People's Army, and the DPRK's interlocutor in the ROK-DPRK military-military talks. Today, he is personally under sanction by the United States and as head of the General Reconnaissance Bureau, is a key figure in the DPRK's military and nuclear strategy, including, it is alleged, the sinking of the ROK warship Cheonan, and shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in 2010.

When I met with him in 1991, we discussed the August 1976 crisis. He explained that they particularly feared the B52 bombers, having seen their country bombed flat during the war and what the B52s did to Vietnam. He confirmed the profound impression made on the North Korean military by the B52 flights during and after the August 1976 crisis. This and other nuclear deployments and exercises in Korea, including B52 flights over Korea from Guam, led him to explain: "That's why we live under the permanent and long run nuclear threat."(11)
I time the genesis of a serious push to acquire the basic elements of a nuclear weapons program from the August 1976 near miss of all-out and nuclear war, when Kim Il Sung found himself compelled by the threat of US nuclear attack to issue his one and only ever "regret" issued for attacks on US forces.

Maybe someone in the White House thinks it's a good thing to remind General Kim of the risks that North Korea runs by threatening nuclear annihilation on cities. Perhaps someone thinks he needs to understand that North Korean nuclear weapons draw fire and invite pre-emption and distract the Korean People's Army from its core mission of posing a conventional military threat to US-ROK

forces.

In my view, he doesn't need that reminder. He's a military man. The B52s of August 1976 are already imprinted in his memory as a key turning point in the history of the post-Armistice Korean conflict. His view was that if hostilities had erupted on August 20, 1976, "then full scale war would have broken out.

"The principle was there," he said. "If you start a full scale war, then you get a full scale war."(12)

In that instance, he was right. It was a near-miss and the stakes were enormous. He hasn't forgotten, I am sure of that. Apparently, we have.

Sending the B52s as a nuclear threat signal simply reaffirms to North Koreans like General Kim the wisdom of developing and threatening to use nuclear weapons, of the necessity of turning the tables on the United States.
Indeed, from a North Korean perspective, the B52s appearing over Korean skies again is not only their worst nightmare from a military perspective and pose a rerun of the immediate risk of nuclear attack that they faced in 1976.

The B52 deployment also declares loudly and clearly that they have forced the United States to play the game of nuclear war with North Korea. It tells them that it has reached the hallowed status of a nuclear-armed state that matters enough to force a simulated nuclear-military response, even if it has not achieved the status of a Nuclear Weapons State in legal and political terms.

Does it really matter what someone like General Kim thinks?

If North Korea is a unified monolith speaking only in one voice, without divergence of views across agencies, levels, or jurisdictions, then no, it doesn't necessarily matter. Best, as Admiral James Winnefeld, the vice chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said on March 16, 2013, to do everything necessary to deter "the young lad" (Kim Jong Un) from doing anything rash (13). At least, that's one argument although implementing this logic might also lead to rash, irrational, and undeterrable actions with enormous consequences.

However, if there are policy currents contending for Kim Jong Un's attention, then it may be extremely unwise to turn up the heat on the North Korean pressure-cooker at this moment. And for careful readers of DPRK propaganda, just such a power play seems to be underway right now in Pyongyang, with the outcome hanging in the balance.

On one side, there are voices—above all, that of General Kim cited above—declaring that North Korea might use nuclear weapons to attack cities like Seoul or Washington (14), and might use nuclear weapons pre-emptively (15), mimicking the declaratory and operational doctrine of some of the lawful Nuclear Weapons States. Indeed, it was the same General Kim who read the March 5, 2013 statement declaring that the DPRK was pulling out of the Korean Armistice Agreement due, amongst other factors, to the deployment of nuclear strike vehicles such as B52 bombers in US-ROK exercises (16).

On the other, there are contrary views that North Korea's "sacred nuclear sword" preserves North Korean "dignity" and "sovereignty" as long as the United States poses a nuclear threat and is hostile towards the DPRK—allowing for the possibility that should these conditions change, then it might rejoin the ranks of non-nuclear weapons states (17).

Deploying nuclear capable bombers accompanied by nuclear threat rhetoric will not quell regressive proliferation sentiment in Seoul. Nor will it persuade North Korea's leaders to desist from nuclear

aggression. Instead, the United States should focus on extending credible deterrence based on usable weapons already in theater. It should use a combination of direct and indirect deterrence, compellence, and reassurance messages that minimizes nuclear threats, maximizes conventional military deterrence, and combines these signals with dialogue and engagement to demonstrate US resolve to achieve a non-hostile relationship with the DPRK.

In this regard, quiet actions will always speak louder in Pyongyang than aggressive words.

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