While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
North Korea’s Nuclear Reality, South Korea’s Arms Anxiety

By Seung-chan Boo

THE LIST OF North Korea’s nuclear weapons “accomplishments” is considerable: Six nuclear tests, increased capabilities, submarine-launched and land-based ballistic missiles, the test-firing of intermediate and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can attack Guam, Hawaii and the mainland US. All of this has led paramount leader Kim Jong Un to declare that the country has become a nuclear-arms power.

These strides have been made in the 25 years since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993. Despite massive international outrage and pressure, the country’s nuclear threat is no longer just a probability. One expert has estimated that North Korea will have up to 100 nuclear weapons by the end of 2020. And the scope of the threat is expanding from South Korea and Japan to the US. The question on many minds is why does North Korea continue to develop nuclear weapons despite tough sanctions and pressure from the international community? Seemingly, for Pyongyang, the costs in terms of isolation and outrage are acceptable. “It is a way to decisively increase the effectiveness of our defense capacity without additionally increasing national defense expenditures,” Pyongyang has said. The calculation seems to be that it is impossible to balance the constant US nuclear threat and the South Korea-US military alliance with a conventional military build-up due to financial constraints.

The enhanced North Korean threat has presented South Korea with new worries over how to cope with the threat amid concerns that the US eventually may not comply with its security commitments to South Korea. When former French President Charles de Gaulle opted out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and chose the path of nuclear armament, he was concerned with “whether the US would sacrifice New York to protect Paris” in the 1960s. The expanded North Korean nuclear missile threat forces South Korea to face the dilemma of “whether the US would sacrifice Guam or Hawaii to protect Seoul.”

Former US President Barack Obama’s laudable goal of a nuclear-free world and no-first-use nuclear policy, together with the US policy of “strategic patience” toward North Korea, also deepened South Korea’s fear of alliance abandonment. Ultimately, South Korea chose to minimize its concerns about alliance abandonment by institutionalizing the US provision of extended deterrence, and it strategically chose to independently cope with North Korea’s nuclear-missile threat by increasing its own military power. South Korea has repeatedly underlined its demand that the US government guarantee extended deterrence in the face of the threat from North Korea.

INSTITUTIONALIZING US EXTENDED DETERRENCE

Under an asymmetrical alliance structure, it is reasonable for the weaker security partner to fear alliance abandonment by the stronger partner. South Korea is no exception. The strength of the South Korea-US alliance lies first in a high level of institutionalization; second, in shared democratic systems; and third, in the norm of regulating alliance policy decisions effectively on a long-term basis. But the essence of Seoul’s concern lies in worries over whether the US will provide extended nuclear deterrence to its ally should North Korea use its nuclear weapons.

In a recent opinion poll in South Korea, between 53.5 percent and 68.2 percent of respondents supported the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons or having South Korea expanding its own military force. Paul K. Huth, “Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War.” The American Political Science Review, Vol. 82, No. 2 (June 1988), p. 424.

Accordingly, it is difficult for South Korea to escape from the alliance dilemma, but also acted as the core driver for pursuing increased military power. The reality of the North Korea nuclear-missile threat has not only made it difficult for South Korea to get out of the arms-race swamp.
develop its own nuclear armory. This reflects South Korea worries about the reliability of US security commitments. Accordingly, South Korea is continuing its efforts to institutionally guarantee US extended deterrence along with strengthening its own military power.

South Korea wanted to cement the US promise of extended deterrence, which was mentioned in the 1978 Joint Statement of the Annual US-South Korea Defense Ministers’ Meeting, in a formal document. Yet the US opposed doing so. However, South Korea’s hard work paid off. At the June 16, 2009, summit meeting between South Korea and the US, the promise to provide extended deterrence, including nuclear capabilities, which had previously been only a spoken commitment from the sitting US Secretary of Defense, was clearly written in the “Joint Vision” document, this improving its legal status.

In 2010, it was agreed to establish the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of extended deterrence, and to contribute to an effective joint defense posture. In April 2015, EDPC and the Counter-Missile Capabilities Committee (CMCC) were integrated into the US-RoK Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC). The US-RoK Foreign and Defense Ministers (2+2) Meeting in October 2016 further agreed to establish the Extended Deterrence Strategy Consultation Group (EDSCG).7

Furthermore, by holding two meetings of the EDSCG, a strong defense commitment using all categories of US military capability was reaffirmed and it was agreed that as long as the North Korean nuclear missile threat continues, rotational deployment of US strategic assets in South Korea and neighboring countries will continue, and an extended deterrence co-operation system will be strengthened.8 Despite these efforts, the reality of the North Korea nuclear-missile threat has not only made it difficult for South Korea to escape from the alliance dilemma, but also acted as the core driver for pursuing increased military power. Consequently, it is difficult for South Korea to get out of the arms-race swamp.

BUILDING A SELF-RELIANT MILITARY POWER

With the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea and the US in 1953, US extended deterrence became the backbone of South Korean security. However, as the security situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula changed with the declaration of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, which called on allies to play a greater role in their own defense, and North Korea’s frequent provocations in the late 1960s, Seoul woke up to the need to build a stronger military. In 1970, the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) was established to strengthen national defense. Under the supervision of ADD, the Lightning Project, which could be said to be the first real defense project in South Korea, was promoted. The Lightning Project, which began in 1971, was intended by then President Park Chung Hee “to immediately start developing domestic weaponry and to make a prototype before the end of the year.”9 Afterward, the South Korean government pursued the top-secret Yulgok Plan for military modernization through 1991. It continued under different names such as the Force Modernization Program (1992-1996), Defense Improvement Program (1997-1998), Acquisition Program (1999-2001), Force Investment Program (2002-2005) and Defense Improvement Program (2006-present).10 Moreover, as indicated in the graph opposite, South Korea responded to North Korea’s strategic missile development after the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2002, spending more than 151 trillion Korean won on defense.

In particular, as North Korea’s nuclear missile threat escalated, so did concerns about the reliability of the US extended deterrence. With the inauguration of the Park Geun-hye administration, South Korea decided to respond independently to the North Korean missile threat, seeking to deploy its “three-pronged defense system,” which has these elements: 1) The Kill-Chain pre-emptive attack system; 2) The Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system, and; 3) The Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) plan to respond to early signs of a North Korean nuclear missile attack. This framework, aimed to be completed by mid-2020, is a massive state project, involving 46 forces including military reconnaissance satellites, MUAV (medium-altitude unmanned aerial vehicle)/HUAV (high-altitude unmanned aerial vehicle), long-range air-to-surface missiles, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, long-range and mid-range surface-to-air missiles and special operations UAV. The resources add up to about 57.4 trillion Korean won (see Table 1 overleaf).

BEYOND THE ARMS RACE TO DENUCLEARIZATION

Since the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, South Korea has lived with the fear of North Korea’s military threat. The same goes for North Korea. With such harsh threats, it has been impossible for either country to break away from the arms race. Since the mid-1970s, South Korea has been ahead of North Korea in the arms race, using US aid and economic growth as a stepping stone.11 However, as a countermeasure, North Korea

---

net/?v=16ID95585
South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mofa.go.kr/www/ wwpenglish/3528287/contents.do
South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Outcome of 2nd Meeting of ROK-US Extended Deterrence Strategy and
Consultation Group (2018.01.18),” www.mofa.go.kr/eng/
brdtm_5676/view.do?seq=191650

---

FIGURE 1 INCREASES IN SOUTH KOREA’S DEFENSE BUDGET AND SHARE FOR FORCE ENHANCEMENT

Source: Korea Defense Industry Association, www.kdia.or.kr/content/3/2/1/view.do
focused on asymmetrical forces such as nuclear missiles. On the other hand, South Korea felt the need to be a self-reliant military power, responding to concerns about alliance abandonment and the North Korean threat. Again, a fierce arms race is under way between the two countries.

The Korean Peninsula has been in a state of heightened crisis greater than at any other time in recent history, with even a preventive US attack being discussed. However, it is not easy to choose a preventive strike, which is the most severe military option, to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear missile threat. First, a preventive attack is difficult to justify under international law; second, the possibility of retaliation from North Korea cannot be ignored, and; third, there is the possibility that the attack may escalate into an expanded war with unpredictable consequences.

Yet South Korea’s three-pronged defense system cannot fully handle the North Korean nuclear missile threat. Instead, it just spurs a vicious cycle of the arms race. As seen in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, although South Korea is trying to peacefully solve the nuclear crisis, North Korea and the US are both reluctant to reach out. Unless the still-uncertain Trump-Kim meeting occurs in May and generates real progress, denuclearization seems remote.

So how can the arms race between the two Koreas be slowed down and moves toward denuclearization begin? The answer lies in finding the underlying cause of North Korea’s obsession with nuclear-missile development. The arms race cannot be tamped down because, so far, an erroneous diagnosis has led to the wrong prescriptions. South Korea, the US and North Korea have all experienced both positive and negative results from attempts to deal with the problems of North Korea. There are the positive facets of history between South and North Korea, such as the July 4th South-North Joint Communiqué in 1972; the conclusion of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement in 1991; and two summit meetings in 2000 and 2007. For the US and North Korea, positive history includes the Geneva Agreement in 1994 and the Leap Day Agreement in 2012. All three countries share the positive history of the September 19 Joint Statement in 2005 and the February 13 Agreement in 2007. Of course, all three share the tragic history of the 1950-53 Korean War. As the philosopher George Santayana, pointed out, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” If a lesson cannot be found in history, the ultimate destination is war. There is never a winner in war. There are only losers who suffer enormous damage, and another loser that may suffer a little less.

Dr. Seung-chan Boo is a research fellow at the Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies, Yonsei University. His current research focuses on reunification and diplomatic and security affairs between South and North Korea. He is also working for the South Korean National Defense Committee as an aide.

This article, originally written in Korean, was translated by Jiseon Chang, Global Asia Fellow at the East Asia Foundation.