

Session 6: Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Korea

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Summary

Panelists in this session presented overviews of perceptions on assurance from both the US and South Korean standpoints. While the US largely perceives the focus of threats to be from nonstate actors, South Korea prioritizes threats from state actors. Threat perceptions in South Korea have also grown in response to recent North Korean provocations in 2010. This disconnect in perception should be addressed in order to ensure that the US and South Korea are on the same page.

The transfer of operations control is seen, in the US, as a reflection of American confidence in South Korea and points to the credibility of US commitment to its ally. For the US this transfer will mean a shift from a US-ROK partnership to ROK-US partnership. However, from the South Korean perspective this transfer is seen as a shift from a US-ROK partnership to a ROK only operation. The emphasis in the US on counterproliferation has also raised concerns in South Korea that the US is more concentrated on containing North Korea rather than actively rolling back their nuclear weapons. South Korea views North Korea's nuclear capabilities as an instrument of blackmail and state coercion, interpreting recent North Korean provocations as acts of extortion. However, panelists stressed that the US is seriously committed to the reduction of nuclear weapons.

The panel expert representing South Korea noted that, despite rhetoric from the US government, South Korea has concerns about the changing nature of US deterrence. A series of signs have indicated to South Korea that US extended deterrence on the peninsula is declining. These include: redeployment of American troops below the Hang River and the

reduction in troops stationed along the DMZ; the diminishment in the scale of exercises; and the disappearing unity of command.

Recent North Korean provocations have led to an increase in South Korean public support for either the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons or the development of an indigenous national nuclear capability. This is viewed by some as signaling to Washington that South Korea needs more assurance, to Pyongyang that there will be consequences for future provocations, and to China that they have to do more to rein in North Korea. American experts on the panel cautioned that this was a bad idea and reflects strategic immaturity on the part of Seoul.

Despite these fears, relations between the US and South Korea are strong, but there is a desire on the part of South Korea for continual reassurance. From a historical perspective, though, there have always been concerns about security commitments to South Korean defense. The mutual defense treaty was accompanied by a need to reassure South Korean security. While there have been fluctuations in perceptions of assurance on both sides, relations between the Obama and Lee administrations could not be better. However, increased discussion in South Korea on the topic of nuclear sovereignty suggests that the issue of assurance is one that the US must continue to work on.

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