

[SE6-OR-1] Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Korea

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Full Summary

This panel focused on South Korean concerns about extended deterrence and especially on issues regarding the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Three of the four panelists are affiliated with the Pacific Forum CSIS, a policy think tank active in both public diplomacy efforts regarding nuclear policy and in organizing U.S.-ROK strategic dialogues about extended deterrence (see <http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-10-no-22>). Ralph Cossa, the president of Pacific Forum, moderated the session.

The first speaker was Brad Glosserman, Executive Director of Pacific Forum. Mr. Glosserman pointed to a growing sense of threat in South Korea after recent North Korean provocations (Cheonan-ham and Yeonpyeong-do attacks). This leads to general concern about the rise of a “new Cold War structure” in East Asia. However, U.S. and ROK officials have somewhat different perceptions of the security environment. Americans may be more concerned about non-state actors whereas South Koreans are worried about a state-based threat. In regards to China, U.S. officials are concerned about China’s military modernization whereas South Koreans are more concerned about China’s “economic threat” and its increasing stake in North Korea’s economy. Meanwhile, the U.S. government is looking to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy; this raises issues about U.S. extended deterrence commitments to allies. Glosserman proceeded to list issue areas on which U.S.-ROK efforts at reassurance are needed, including an updated bilateral nuclear agreement addressing pyro-processing, as well as progress on the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON). While there may be little fear in the ROK that the DPRK will actually use nuclear weapons, South Koreans are concerned about nuclear blackmail and conventional adventurism by a nuclear North Korea.

Cheon Seong-Whun, a fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) advanced an argument for the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil. Dr. Cheon outlined what he says are the major reasons for South Korean concerns about a decline in the U.S. extended deterrence commitment since the end of the

Cold War. He cited 1) the pull-back of U.S. troops away from the DMZ and redeployment out of the ROK; 2) the reduced scale of U.S.-ROK military exercises; 3) the expansion of roles/missions for U.S. Forces in Korea (strategic flexibility) so that USFK is no longer exclusively focused on North Korea; 4) the dismantlement of the unified U.S.-ROK wartime command with OPCON transfer; 5) U.S. willingness to offer security commitments to North Korea that might impinge on ROK security; and 6) the danger that U.S. limited resources may be drained while American attention is focused on conflicts in other parts of the world.

Scott Snyder, a fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations and the Pacific Forum provided historical background for South Korean fears of abandonment. He argued that the U.S. need to provide reassurance for the ROK goes back to the early days of the alliance when Seoul needed to be reassured after the Korean War and North Korea needed to be deterred. Changes in U.S. foreign policy over various U.S. administrations were sometimes worrying and at other times reassuring to Seoul. South Koreans were apprehensive about the U.S. shift from massive retaliation to flexible response and especially about the Carter administration's desire for troop withdrawals. In contrast, the Reagan administration offered doctrinal reassurances, more high-level contacts, advanced weapons systems, and the inauguration of Team Spirit exercises. After the Cold War, the U.S. began direct engagement with North Korea and this raised doubts in Seoul about the U.S. defense commitment. Most recently, the Obama administration provided written reassurance about the U.S. nuclear umbrella at President Lee Myung-bak's request. Presently, relations between the leaders are excellent and U.S.-ROK military exercises have increased in response to DPRK provocations.

Mr. Cossa commented that there is a daily need for practicing reassurance to keep the alliance strong. Many in Asia still have an image of helicopters taking off from a roof in Vietnam, and feel uncertain as to whether the U.S. will stay in Asia. But the U.S. has demonstrated its staying power in words and deeds over the decades, and concerns about decline in U.S. capabilities are exaggerated. The issue for the credibility of extended deterrence is that while the Obama administration's commitment to nuclear zero is laudable and attracts support, moving toward zero and getting to zero are different things, and no one has figured out how to do the latter. That being said, U.S.-ROK relations are better today than ever, so it is surprising that South Korean desires for nuclear weapons may be at an all-time high. That tells Americans that relations are not good or that the U.S. is not considered credible. While this may not be what South Koreans believe or intend to convey, such perceptions are a problem for the alliance.

The discussion with the audience largely focused on the idea of redeploying tactical nuclear weapons in the ROK. South Koreans were said to be concerned about sending a tough

signal to North Korea and pressuring China. There are also concerns in the ROK that the U.S. is more interested in containment than with rolling back DPRK nuclear capabilities. Several American participants argued that reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons would have no operational value, would be destabilizing in the region, and would be unhelpful to global nonproliferation and disarmament efforts. However, South Koreans were said to be frustrated that other initiatives have not worked in dealing with North Korea and thus want “an equalizer” in order to negotiate with Pyongyang about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula on equal footing. The argument was made by Dr. Cheon that while returning U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korean soil would involve other difficulties, such a policy would be more desirable and stabilizing than the ROK developing nuclear weapons itself or adopting an aggressive/preemptive conventional doctrine against North Korea. Most experts in the room remained opposed to the idea, but there was general agreement that reassurance is a two-way conversation. Rather than just saying “no” to or dismissing South Korean voices calling for nuclear weapons, it is important to have robust alliance consultation and to expand public diplomacy on nuclear issues.

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