

[SE6-OR-2] Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Korea

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Full Summary

Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum, moderated the session on Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Korea. Panelists in this session presented overviews of perceptions on assurance from both the U.S. and South Korean standpoints. While the U.S. 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 U.S. and South Korea are on the same page.

Brad Glosserman, executive director of the Pacific Forum, provided key takeaways from several strategic dialogues and public diplomacy tours conducted by the Pacific Forum. The recent North Korean provocations, the sinking of the Cheonan in 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, have raised levels of threat perception in South Korea. While the U.S. tends to focus on threats from non-state actors, in the Northeast Asia region South Korea and Japan focus on threats from state actors. Though Glosserman commented that there is little fear in the Republic of Korea (ROK) that North Korea will use nuclear weapons. North Korea's nuclear capability seems to be more an instrument of blackmail and state coercion than an actual physical threat. The recent provocations can be interpreted more as actions meant to extort than to renew armed conflict on the peninsula.

There are also rising concerns that there is a new Cold War structure is emerging in the region: the U.S., Japan and South Korea against North Korea, China and Russia. Although from the U.S. perspective China poses primarily an economic, rather than physical, threat. Glosserman noted that though relations between the U.S. and South Korea are strong, there is a desire for continual reassurance from the U.S. on the part of South Korea. However, from a U.S. standpoint discussions over the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) are a reflection of U.S. confidence in its ally and a credible example of continued U.S. commitment. Right now the U.S. is focused intently on nuclear deterrence, with serious attempts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national defense strategy.

The U.S. emphasis on counter-proliferation has raised concerns in South Korea that the U.S. is more concerned with containment than rolling back nuclear weapons. Glosserman found that in South Korea there is widespread support for either the reintroduction of American tactical nuclear weapons or the development of an independent ROK nuclear capability. This is viewed by some as a signal 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. Glosserman cautioned that this was a bad idea and reflects strategic immaturity on the part of Seoul. Relations between the U.S. and ROK will also be important for development in Japan. There is a need for more trilateral cooperation between the U.S., South Korea and Japan, and Seoul and Tokyo need to work more closely with each other and with the U.S.

Cheon Seong-Whun, a fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification, shared some of the South Korean views on deterrence and assurance. He noted that, despite rhetoric from the U.S. government, many in ROK have concerns about the changing nature of American deterrence. During the Cold War there were no such concerns, but as that conflict is at an end there are now troubling signs that show that U.S. extended deterrence in the region is declining. Dr. Cheon cited several examples: 1) the U.S. redeployment of forces from the DMZ; 2) the diminishing scale of joint U.S.-ROK military exercises; 3) the shift away from the role of the U.S. Forces in Korea as a tripwire towards more strategic flexibility; 4) the OPCON transfer; 5) receptivity within the U.S. toward offering North Korea security commitments; 6) limited U.S. resources that mean that American attention is focused on other parts of the world.

Cheon stated that these signs are being received at a time when the prevailing public sentiment in South Korea is one of frustration with the sense that the country is being blackmailed by North Korea's provocations. From this there has grown a desire for a strategic equalizer, the South Korean public feels that North Korea poses a real nuclear threat and there have been renewed calls for preventive countermeasures. The most extreme would be a South Korean nuclear weapons system, which Cheon states is favored by seventy percent of the population. If North Korea were to conduct a third nuclear test, public opinion within South Korea would be fierce. Less extreme would be an aggressive ROK military doctrine that includes preemption, but this runs the risk of prompting North Korea to initiate their own forces in advance. Least extreme would be the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, an option that all the U.S. panelists stressed is not being considered by Washington.

Scott Snyder, fellow with both the Council on Foreign Relations and Pacific Forum, rounded out the panel with a presentation on the historical context underlying the issue of assurance. He noted that Dr. Cheon's remarks were indicative of the fact that there have always been

concerns about security commitments to South Korean defense. At the beginning of the alliance, the mutual defense treaty was accompanied by a need to reassure South Korean security. The need for assurance and a fear of abandonment have always been a constant. ROK has observed, with unease, as the U.S. nuclear doctrine has shifted from massive retaliation to flexible response. There was an up tick during the Regan administration when there were a series of assurances on the part of the U.S., including the indication of high-level support in the form of an early state visit from the ROK president, the strengthened support for advanced weapons systems, and the launch of Team Spirit exercises. However, with the end of the Cold War South Korea has watched with trepidation U.S. efforts at direct engagement with North Korea, an issue that creates ROK doubts in U.S. assurance.

The current period of U.S.-ROK relations is more analogous to the Reagan period. Indicative of this is the fact that relations between the Obama and Lee administrations could not be better; joint statements between the two countries are a written commitment to the continued commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella; and the increase in joint U.S.-ROK military exercises in light of recent North Korean provocations. However, Snyder cautioned that South Korean calls for discussion on the topic of nuclear sovereignty suggest that the issue of assurances is one that the U.S. must continue to work on. The extended deterrence nuclear commitments that the U.S. has made have suffered a dip in credibility within South Korea. Current U.S. financial constraints also have some in South Korea questioning the credibility of U.S. commitments. And while the U.S. has attempted to engage with North Korea in the past, is it possible for to continue to offer assurances to North Korea in a way that doesn't damage assurance to South Korea?

After the panelists concluded their presentations, Mr. Cossa noted that reassurance is a daily mission of the U.S. and that the relationship between the US and South Korea is strong. However, he stressed that there is a disconnect between the good relations and the differing opinions on extended deterrence and assurance. He echoed Glosserman's point that, from a U.S. perspective, the transfer of OPCON is viewed as 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. Cossa agreed with Snyder's point that, historically, there have always been concerns about security commitments to South Korean defense. 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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