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Asan North Korea Conference 2013: Nuclear Strategy and Deterrence

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In terms of ballistic missile proliferation, especially in vertical way, Northeast Asia is highly “concern-rich” region, and significant amount of concern about ballistic missile threats come from North Korea. Combined with nuclear development program, missile forces of North Korea bring serious security concerns in the region. On the other hand, however, North Korea’s thought about nuclear strategy is very unclear. One possible speculation on that is that, considering technological unreliability of North Korea’s ballistic missile and limited number of potential nuclear warheads, their nuclear strategy needs to be basically based on “existential deterrence.” Existential deterrence is not deterrence based on actual military utility of nuclear weapon. The deterrent effect of existential deterrence comes from a bare fact of the existence of nuclear weapon. In case of the normal thoughts of deterrence, military calculations based on yield of warheads, accuracy of missiles, and the number of nuclear tipped missile are critical variables to assess credibility of deterrence, because these variables determine kinetic effects of its nuclear forces.

On the other hand, in case of existential deterrence, their physical military effects have only secondary importance. For this thought of deterrence, simple existence of nuclear weapons assumed to have psychological effects on challenger’s mind and restrict challenger’s range of behaviors. Again, given qualitative and quantitative limitation of North Korea’s potential nuclear arsenal, existential deterrence must be a guiding principle for their nuclear strategy.

Next question should be how international community can deter North Korea’s provocation reinforced by existential nuclear deterrence. Even though existential nuclear deterrence is highly primitive form of nuclear deterrence, it may provide for North Korea a sense of deterring regional countries’ retaliation against North Korea’s provocation. The important thing to be considered to answer this question is, it basically relies on North Korea’s subjective judgment about the U.S. and other countries resolve to counter North Korea’s provocation, rather than more objectively assessed credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence.

From assurance side, even after North Korea’s potential successful deployment nuclear tipped ICBM, countries under the umbrella of U.S. extended deterrence can continue to rely on it. “Deterred” by North Korea will bring unaffordable cost for U.S. global security commitment. If the U.S. is deterred by the small number of North

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Korean nuclear missiles, credibility of U.S. security challenge for all over the world will be questioned. And if handful of nuclear weapon is enough to deter the U.S., proliferation of nuclear weapon will no longer be able to block, because North Korea “proves” the effectiveness of nuclear weapon to deter the U.S in such case. These costs are too much for the U.S. and regional allies can continue to expect the U.S. will continue to maintain current robust deterrence posture against North Korea.

Again, however, whether international community can deter North Korea’s provocation totally relies on North Korea’s subjective judgment. Even though North Korea’s nuclear missile deployment will not undermine credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, North Korea may perceive that it achieves robust deterrent against the U.S. and other regional countries. In this case, North Korea would likely to intensify their provocation against ROK, and possibly against Japan as well. To respond such intensified provocation, the U.S. and regional allies need to demonstrate their robust deterrence posture in more visible and operational ways. This will be a big challenge for regional countries to deal with potential intensification of North Korea’s provocation after their nuclear deployment.