

Balancing deterrence and restraint

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Yoon Young-kwan
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The Financial Times last month reported the results of its analysis of confidential Russian military documents from 2008 to 2014. Russia had set the strategy of using nuclear weapons if it failed to achieve its military goals with conventional weapons, the report said, adding that Russia still follows the military guideline. The analysis gave some clues to comprehending why Joe Biden's administration steadfastly refused to provide the long-range ATACMS missiles Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wanted. Coincidentally, in a contribution to Foreign Affairs last year, Professor Keir Lieber from Georgetown University and Professor Daryl Press from Dartmouth College argued that the danger of nuclear war revived, not disappeared, after the Cold War. The two scholars pointed to the high possibility that nuclear-armed U.S. adversaries would use strategic weapons instead of stopping at bluffing.

The problem is that South Korea cannot avoid the risk. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un swiftly turned to a hardline stance after his failed Hanoi summit with Donald Trump in February 2019. In the eighth Workers' Party Congress in January two years later, he announced five major tasks — such as the development of strategic attack submarines, hypersonic missiles, and underwater- or ground-launched ICBMs — as a part of the country's five-year defense development to help reinforce its nuclear capabilities. For instance, if the North deploys supersonic short-range missiles tipped with small warheads to brace for real battles, it poses a substantial threat to South Korea. In September 2022, North Korea declared it can use nukes on five occasions after enacting the Nuclear Forces Policy Law earlier.

Under such a volatile security situation, what matters most is that we strengthen our deterrence against the North's strategic attack on the South. History shows that naively relying on the enemy's goodwill without building strong deterrence is destined to fail. Just think of the disastrous Munich Agreement struck by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain with Adolf Hitler in 1938. In that sense, our military cooperation with the United States and our trilateral security cooperation with America and Japan were the right choices. But given all the challenges ahead, that's not enough.

First, the Biden administration needs to strengthen its effort for dialogue with North Korea to lower the risk of an accidental nuclear war in the Korean Peninsula. As the North also would not want a nuclear war to take place here, the U.S. government should open communication channels between the two countries' military authorities and take steps toward building trust and action guidelines for both sides. Second, the U.S. government must block Russia's victory in the Ukraine war by continuously assisting the country by rallying international support from NATO members. If Russia wins the war, it also means the victory of North Korea and China, as they are closely linked to one another. If Uncle Sam's international leadership weakens, North Korea can misjudge South Korea.

What should the Korean government do? It would be desirable if the government demonstrates a strong determination to deter the North while restraining itself from overreaction. Western security experts unanimously stress the need for the South to take a balanced approach to dealing with the North. The two American professors pointed out that if nuclear-armed North Korea is pushed into a corner, it could use the nuclear arsenals it strenuously built to compensate for its relative weakness in conventional weaponry. Therefore, the two allies must stop at destroying the long-range multiple rocket launchers if the North attacks the South with those artilleries, rather than responding over the top.

Dr. Bruce Klingner at The Heritage Foundation also shares the view. In an interview with Yonhap News in February, Klingner, who is helping Trump's campaign, warned of a possible military clash from misjudgments. As both sides are determined to launch a stern counterattack against the other, South Korea needs to strike a balance between maintaining strong military posture enough to deter the North's military offensives and minimizing the risk of an accidental clash escalating to a real war.

A security crisis will likely occur in the peninsula this year. We must prevent a limited war from escalating into a full-scale war. The situation can fluctuate depending on who wins the Nov. 5 U.S. presidential election. If the alliance shakes to a dangerous level and our deterrence weakens alarmingly, we must put on the table all possible options, including nuclear armaments and redeployment of U.S. tactical weapons, and draw up our security strategy again. The government should be prepared for all scenarios and start to do what it can do now.

* The view expressed herein was published on March 06 in the *Korea JoongAng Daily* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies