

Modernizing Nuclear Policy in the East China Sea Region

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons have been in constant use since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Cynics need to look no further than the nuclear landscape in the East China Sea as proof that even though there are no nuclear detonations, nuclear weapons are constantly employed to affect regional and global stability. North Korea's nuclear weapons program upsets regional stability and immediately threatens the current rules-based international order. To restore stability in the East China Sea and protect the rules-based international order, the United States must update its nuclear policy. This revision must acknowledge the capabilities and risks posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program, reverse its stance against nuclear proliferation and shift its focus to arms control instead of denuclearization.

Acknowledging the Threat

To add stability to the East China Sea region, the United States must formally acknowledge what all of the countries in the area already know – that North Korea is a nuclear state capable of threatening the United States homeland and its allies. Despite decades of negotiations between the United States and North Korea regarding terminating their nuclear weapons program, North Korea has tested nuclear weapons six times since 2006.¹ In 2018, despite a lack of measurable proof that past attempts to convince North Korea to denuclearize had any effect, the United States remained committed to its aspirations for a nuclear weapon free Korean peninsula in its Nuclear Posture Review.² Even after Kim Jong Un signed an agreement committing to the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula later that year, North Korea

¹ Bennett, Bruce W., Kang Choi, Myong-Hyun Go, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., Jiyoung Park, Bruce Klingner, and Du-Hyeogn Cha, *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), p. x.

² *Ibid*, p. xiii.

has tested over 30 short to medium-range ballistic missiles. Current assessments report that North Korea's nuclear inventory likely consists of approximately 50-60 nuclear warheads that are deployable on various platforms and that it has the materials necessary to produce up to 12 warheads a year.³

A United States nuclear policy that does not incorporate these data points is a policy that is unlikely to succeed. North Korea has not given any indication that any of the negotiations or sanctions have motivated them to eliminate their nuclear program and denuclearize. North Korea's words and actions over the years have indicated that they are increasingly unwilling to yield their nuclear program. The United States must accept and admit that it failed to prevent North Korea from producing nuclear weapons. Formally acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear state serves several purposes.

Domestically, it will enable policymakers to develop a strategy and guidance applicable to the current global environment and, as a result, will have a higher probability of success. Internationally, it allows North Korea to realize one of its national objectives while also giving a nod to its progress over the years.⁴ Of even more international significance, the United States confessing its shortcomings surrounding North Korea's nuclear weapons program will permit it to preserve credibility with its allies. It will not wholly assuage Japan's and South Korea's fears of a nuclear attack by North Korea. Still, it will have a stabilizing effect by demonstrating that the United States is aware of its failings, adjusting based on the "new" reality, and remaining engaged in the region.

³ Daniel Post, "Deterring North Korea," War on the Rocks, January 29, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/deterring-north-korea/>. (accessed September 23, 2021).

⁴ Bennet et al., Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons, p. 12.

Winning Back Allies

To add stability to the East China Sea region, the United States must reverse its long-held stance against nuclear nonproliferation. In 2018, Japan's former Defense Minister questioned the credibility of the extended deterrence offered by the United States.⁵ Japanese research groups made it even more transparent by suggesting that if there was any doubt that the United States extended deterrence was reliable, that Japan could become a nuclear weapon state themselves. South Korea's viewpoint on the extended deterrence offered by the United States is equally as bleak. In two separate instances since 2017, South Korea has requested that the United States redeploy nuclear weapons to the peninsula and for the United States to increase patrols by strategic assets around the country to bolster extended deterrence.⁶ As recently as two years ago, South Korea's People Power Party leader shared the belief that the United States would not affect North Korea's nuclear weapons development and proclaimed that South Korea should consider an independent nuclear capability. Japan and South Korea are both countries that have well-documented histories as being against indigenous nuclear weapons programs, which makes their willingness to consider them an even more direct insult of the United States' credibility.

As United States' allies, Japan's and South Korea's support of the rules-based international order is critical to stability in the East China Sea region. Regaining their faith must be a priority of the United States' nuclear policy in the region. A United States nuclear policy that forsakes its long-held stance on nuclear nonproliferation will secure Japan's and South Korea's faith. It will position the United States to put the needs of Japan and South Korea first.

⁵ Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications," *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:1 (2021): 157-175, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2021.1894709.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Politically this will be difficult because it will contradict all of the United States' previous statements about pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons. Still, Japan and South Korea will view anything short of this as indistinguishable from all prior assurance attempts by the United States. Simply being open to the idea of endorsing Japan's or South Korea's nuclearization will signal the United States' willingness to offer maximal ally support instead of limited extended deterrence. It is essential for regional stability that the United States accept the feedback from Japan and South Korea, empathize with their concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons, and be open to each country's nuclearization to address the issues.

Fortifying Extended Deterrence Counter Argument

A counterpoint to allowing nuclear proliferation is that permitting more countries in the East China Sea to nuclearize will induce regional instability. This counterpoint highlights that the nuclearization of Japan or South Korea will provoke North Korea and probably China, which would negatively impact stability in the region. It also suggests that the United States should prevent Japan and South Korea from developing nuclear weapons and instead make other concessions to fortify the extended deterrence currently being offered (more patrols with strategic assets from the United States, redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea, etc.).⁷ This critique falls short in that it fails to appreciate the level of instability that already exists in the region, the nuances of extended deterrence, and the destabilizing effect that any steps the United States takes to fortify its extended deterrence will have in the region.

Tensions in the East China Sea have yet to produce armed conflict, but the situation is not "stable." North Korea is a nuclear state against the United States' wishes, causing Japan and South Korea to consider ending their reliance on extended deterrence and nuclearizing

⁷ Heginbotham and Samuels, "Vulnerable US Alliances".

themselves. To make a bad situation worse, when Japan and South Korea raised concerns about the effectiveness of extended deterrence to the United States, it was more interested in dictating economic terms and extracting money from them than assuring them.⁸ These events have caused the United States' alliances with Japan and South Korea to weaken over the years, risking more than just regional partners. The result is that regional stability, and the rules-based international order, hang in the balance because the United States cannot maintain them alone.

Without the United States' freedom to support nuclear proliferation to allies, it will not be able to fortify its extended deterrence in a way that will alleviate Japan's and South Korea's fear of North Korea. Japan and South Korea's issue with the United States' extended deterrence is not a question of whether the United States has the technical means or capability to protect their countries. It is a matter of the United States' will to do so. Thomas Schelling referred to this as reassurance and highlighted its relation to deterrence when he specified that there would be no reason to conform to the deterrent demands if credible reassurance was absent.⁹ The United States can say all right things and perform additional actions to prove their commitment to Japan and South Korea's protection. Still, if neither country believes that they will get access to the United States' resources when they feel they need them, neither country has an incentive not to nuclearize. Doing more things does not automatically equate to more credibility and effective extended deterrence. The United States must rebuild credibility by doing something outside the norm to demonstrate that it is willing to immediately work with Japan and South Korea to reestablish regional stability in ultimate support of the rules-based international order.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 74.

However, even if the United States' credibility was not in question and fortifying extended deterrence worked for Japan and South Korea, it is unrealistic to believe that doing so would contribute to regional stability. North Korea will not be less riled by dual-capable aircraft and United States tactical nuclear weapons being deployed to South Korea than it would if the tactical nuclear weapons were Japan's or South Korea's. The Kim regime will interpret either act as a hostile threat. Given North Korea's self-image as a regional nuclear power, the threat of a nuclearized Japan or South Korea may be enough to motivate it to negotiate to prevent it. This negotiation would create further opportunities for the United States to bring stability back to the region. If a future with Japanese and South Korean nuclear weapons was not enough to bring North Korea to the bargaining table and both countries decided to develop their own nuclear weapons, it would erase all of the progress North Korea has made in the last 20-30 years. **Arms Control Over Denuclearization**

To add stability to the East China Sea region, the United States must deal with the increase in nuclear weapons already present in the region through effective arms control. While limiting the number of nuclear weapons that North Korea has does not directly make the United States or its allies safer, it will minimize the opportunity for proliferation to non-state actors, making the world safer. Current United States nuclear policy states that any nuclear weapon attacks on its homeland or allies will effectively end the Kim regime.¹⁰ It further asserts that any weapons transfer by North Korea will result in punitive actions against the Kim regime. This coercive policy has effectively prevented a North Korean nuclear attack on the United States or its allies, but not at preventing or limiting North Korea's nuclear weapon program. None of the coercive policies enacted by the United States have slowed North Korea's nuclear productivity.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, D.C., February 2018b, p. 33.

Switching from coercion to persuasion will more effectively encourage North Korea to participate in arms control agreements.

The United States should treat North Korea the same as other nuclear-capable adversaries to persuade it to limit further nuclear weapons production. This treatment includes participating in summits together, establishing hotlines with one another, including them in international nuclear-related groups, or inviting Kim Jong Un to the United States. This is a sensible trade to limit continued nuclear weapons production if the United States avoids accommodating North Korea's every demand. Another option would be for the United States to negotiate globally recognizing North Korea's nuclear program for ceased production. Being acknowledged as a nuclear state is one of North Korea's objectives based on all of the benefits it associates with having nuclear weapons (status as a regional power, the ability to bully its neighbors, and qualification as a strong, prosperous nation).¹¹ The cost for the United States would be to publicly recognize something that it, and all of its allies, has known for years. The price for North Korea would be any warheads it planned to develop in the future. The United States' coercive position against North Korea using or transferring any of its nuclear weapons would still be in place, and North Korea would still have the weapons that they have developed up to the time of the agreement. Neither side would get everything it wanted, but it would be a starting point toward denuclearization.

Denuclearization is Safety Counter Argument

The main critique against strictly pursuing arms control is that North Korea's complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization is the only way to protect the United States and its allies from a nuclear attack. While the assessment is technically accurate, the same is also true of

¹¹ Bennet et al., *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons*, p. 7-12.

Russia and China. Both countries have nuclear weapons capable of striking the United States homeland and its allies in the East China Sea. The United States does not demand Russia's or China's immediate denuclearization in any nuclear policy. This uneven application of standards reveals that the protest is more against who is in control of the nuclear weapons than it is about the nuclear weapons being able to range United States' and allies' soil.

The media in the United States portrays Kim Jong Un as more erratic, less predictable, and less rational than Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Even if this is true, one of the things that he has in common with his contemporaries is his commitment to maintaining his power. No leader wants their regime forcefully overthrown. The United States must shift its focus from denuclearization to arms control to prevent Kim Jong Un from believing that the United States is laying the groundwork necessary to topple his regime.¹² Arms control negotiations will give the United States a chance to communicate what will and what will not be permissible concerning the future of North Korea's nuclear weapons. Nuclear policy centered on arms control bolsters deterrence by offering Kim Jong Un a way to modify his behavior in ways that will sustain regional stability and keep his regime in place.

Conclusion

Working towards a world in which nuclear weapons no longer exist is an admirable pursuit. Former United States President Barak Obama spoke of this in his address in the Czech Republic in 2009. He declared, "So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."¹³ It was in this

¹² Bennet et al., *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons*, p. 8-9.

¹³ Barack Obama, transcript of remarks delivered at Prague, April 5, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

same speech that he also mentioned, "Make no mistake, as long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary and to guarantee that defense to our allies...". Modernizing United States nuclear policy is the only way to continue to deter its adversaries and provide meaningful guarantees to its allies in the East China Sea. United States regional nuclear policy must take stock of the region's current nuclear environment, support its partners even at the detriment of the status quo, and shift the near-term focus from denuclearization to arms control.

Acknowledging the capabilities and threats posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program will allow policymakers to develop an executable strategy. Being open to nuclear proliferation will demonstrate that "America is back" by sacrificing a long-standing national principle in favor of regional alliances with Japan and South Korea. Pivoting to arms control provides an opportunity for the United States and North Korea to participate in negotiations in which each side can emerge victoriously. These progressive changes reflect today's global environment. This nuclear policy provides the United States and its allies the best protection from a North Korean nuclear attack by reestablishing regional stability and preserving the current rules-based international order.