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Global NK International Conference

Nuclear Competition and Escalation Pathways in East Asia: ROK, US, and PRC Perspectives on Cooperation for the Future of the Korean Peninsula

Session 1. Nuclear Competition and Security Challenges in East Asia: DPRK Policies of ROK,
US, and PRC, and the Scenarios of Military Confrontations

East Asia Institute (EAI)

Grandview Institution (国观智库)

Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center

Peking University (北京大学)

Session 1.

Nuclear Competition and Security Challenges in East Asia:

DPRK Policies of ROK, US, and PRC, and the Scenarios of Military Confrontations

- Time: May 10, 2023 (Wednesday), 09:30–11:10
- Location: Orchid Room, The Westin Josun Seoul
- Panelists (in alphabetical order): BUNN, Matthew (Professor, Harvard Kennedy School); HA, Young-Sun (Chairman, EAI); JIA, Qingguo (Professor, Peking University); KIM, Inhan (Professor, Ewha Womans University); PARK, John (Director, Korea Project, Belfer Center); PARK, Won Gon (Chair, EAI Center for North Korea Studies; Professor, Ewha Womans University); ZHANG, Tuosheng (Chairman, Grandview Institution)

■ Presenter: BUNN, Matthew (Professor, Harvard Kennedy School)

“Deterring Without Provoking”

- Whenever a state makes its key decision, its security implication to the adversary and the adversary’s potential response must be considered. In this context, in order to maximize security, the state must assess both the defense-deterrent value and provocation risks.
- What the ROK and U.S. see as deterrent and defensive may be seen as an offensive threat to the DPRK. In crisis, therefore, North Korean misperceptions of ROK-US actions could provoke unwanted escalation.
- Escalation risks link deterrence of large-scale war and smaller provocations. “Core” deterrence, or stopping a full-scale war “out of the blue” is likely to be strong, but deterrence of smaller-scale provocations may fail. Big concern on deterrence lies on the inadvertent steps that could lead to war when small conflicts get out of control.
- In planning responses to provocations, combined ROK-U.S. forces need to consider both the effect on deterring further outrages and the risk of provoking DPRK.
- “Deterring Without Provoking” Policy Dilemma #1: ROK-U.S. want conventional superiority for defense and deterrence, but history suggests that side facing conventional inferiority is more likely to use nuclear weapons.

- “Deterring Without Provoking” Policy Dilemma #2: ROK and U.S. want to improve their ability to target DPRK nuclear forces, thereby exacerbating DPRK fear of such targeting. This increases incentive to build more weapons or even pre-delegate nuclear use authority.
- So how do we mitigate these dilemmas? Reduce the temperature, systematically include provocation risk in planning, apply confidence-building measures, and employ nuclear restraints.

■ Presenter: JIA, Qingguo (Professor, Peking University)

“The Imposed Strategic Competition: China’s Response and Its Position on the North Korean Nuclear Program”

- The term “strategic competition” is “imposed” on China by the U.S., and China has never accepted this term. China believes that this term does not adequately capture the complicated bilateral relationship. Outright “public” competition is untraditional for Chinese—instead, Chinese tend to compete under the table.
- United States’ determination to engage in a “strategic competition” has resulted in a distinct pattern of behavior that makes the relationship more difficult and confrontational. Trump and Biden have both been pursuing high-tech decoupling, supply chain redirection, and military preparation in places of China’s interest.
- Of all U.S. actions, China is most concerned about U.S. challenge against the territorial sovereignty and integrity over Taiwan. Under this circumstance, China is rethinking its national strategy.
- Since Biden came into office, U.S. policy toward China has become less volatile and outright provocative. Yet Congress poses the problem—it has become increasingly proactive over Taiwan, passing bills and resolutions unfavorable to China.
- While U.S. “containment” policy against China aims to take away China’s stake in the international order, China must be stronger and more capable to “wreck the [U.S.-led] order” if it finds interest in doing so. Against this background, China rethinks its nuclear policy.

- China's nuclear policy has been based on three pillars: (1) minimum in number, (2) no first use, and (3) nonproliferation. With growing U.S. threat, there is growing voices in China calling for a stronger stance.
- In short, U.S. should stop meddling with Taiwan and engage with China. It is never too late to stop confrontation and seek cooperation.

■ Presenter: PARK, Won Gon (Chair, EAI Center for North Korea Studies; Professor, Ewha Womans University)

"North Korea's Nuclear Maneuverings: Signaling the Demise of Longstanding Pursuit for Complete Denuclearization?"

- Since 2019 until today, DPRK continues provoking, developing nuclear weapons, and pursuing its "Frontal Breakthrough" policy. "Frontal Breakthrough" constitutes four principles: (1) self-reliance, (2) ideological indoctrination, (3) confrontational policy toward ROK and U.S., and (4) nuclear development "in the most sophisticated way."
- Clearly, DPRK's ultimate goal is to be recognized by the world, U.S. in particular, as a de facto nuclear state. In this context, complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) and complete denuclearization are rather unrealistic.
- While North Korea continues provocations, there are clear differences in its behavior that have serious implications. Pyongyang explicitly states that the provocations target ROK and U.S., conducts tests during ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, deploys missiles for tangible warfare, diversifies platforms to launch the missiles, and broadcasts its provocations to its own people.
- While the international community must not holistically disregard the possibility of a seventh nuclear test, DPRK is facing some critical difficulties. Strengthening ROK-U.S.-Japan ties and advancement of the high-tech sector are burdensome to the DPRK. While Kim Jong Un declared that DPRK will achieve 1.4-fold increase in GDP by 2026, this is virtually impossible partially due to its self-imposed border closure.

- For effective economic development, North Korea must inevitably come to the negotiating table and take meaningful steps for denuclearization. Without such actions, there remains no chance for sanctions relief.
- Partial denuclearization without a clear and comprehensive goal of complete denuclearization could provide space for DPRK to find ways to retain its nuclear arsenal indefinitely.

■ Discussion 1: PARK, John (Director, Korea Project, Belfer Center)

- In a perception vs. reality perspective, we are currently seeing an important dynamic of perception being greater than reality. In fact, contrary to this perspective, historical reality shows that the U.S. is resilient and adaptive to changing order. It also suggests that the U.S. is not in an irreversible decline.
- If the strategic competition between U.S. and China is “imposed” by the U.S., as Professor Jia Qingguo suggests, this perception reflects that there is a clear difference in how the two countries are defining or the term.

■ Discussion 2: ZHANG, Tuosheng (Chairman, Grandview Institution)

- Kim Jong Un’s claim that North Korea made a “significant nuclear achievement” is “not totally groundless, but overstated.” The international community is concerned about DPRK’s potential nuclear test, but it seems unnecessary for them to conduct it. DPRK already has sufficient capability to deter U.S., ROK, and Japan.
- Yet nuclear conflict due to miscalculation could be possible. In an event of a serious military confrontation between ROK-U.S. and DPRK, North Korea may strike first or the U.S. may strike preemptively.
- Some Chinese experts believe that DPRK’s possession of nuclear weapons reduced the possibility of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. This, however, increased the risk of nuclear proliferation, potentially creating a domino effect in the region. North Korea’s development

of weapons could provide U.S. an excuse to deploy strategic asset to ROK or Japan, thereby posing immense security threat to China.

■ Discussion 3: KIM, Inhan (Professor, Ewha Womans University)

- Professor Bunn mentioned that ROK-U.S. should avoid provocation and provide reassurance to secure deterrence. Yet this begs an important question about South Korea's security concerns from the lack of its capability to deter DPRK's "nuclear" attack. ROK-U.S. must find a balance between keeping a strong alliance and alleviating DPRK's security concern.
- Regarding Professor Bunn's call for the need to "reduce the temperature," the international community should keep in mind that various approaches like the Sunshine Policy and Six-Party Talks have been taken, but were ineffective.
- On Professor Jia Qingguo's presentation on the "imposed" competition, one should remember that ROK and U.S. never shut China out of the table. China should fulfill its duty by raising its voice against DPRK provocation because this is also a China problem.

■ Discussion 4: BUNN, Matthew

- One important aspect in deterring Kim Jong Un from using nuclear weapons is convincing him that the U.S. will not threaten regime survival as long as he doesn't attack (the U.S. or its allies in the region).
- China has done just as much as the U.S. to "impose" the strategic competition.
- Given that Secretary Blinken officially said that he hopes to schedule his trip to China, hopefully U.S. and China will get back to conversation. There are many world challenges like climate change, future pandemic, and nuclear war, for which U.S.-China cooperation is required.

■ Discussion 5: JIA, Qingguo

- China has its own share of responsibility for deteriorating bilateral relationship. China could have handled better in some respect.

- At the moment, U.S. and China both face opportunities and shared interest in stabilization and even improvement of bilateral relationship. Biden has flexibility to handle the relationship with China, and China needs to restore economic growth.

■ Discussion 6: PARK, Won Gon

- DPRK emphasizes its right to survival, which includes permanently halting joint military exercises and deployment of strategic assets, and withdrawal of the USFK. At the same time, DPRK knows that ROK and the U.S. will not attack them first.
- Nevertheless, both the ROK and U.S. governments need to work on signaling the possibility of dialogue with North Korea. Biden administration's "calibrated and practical approach" still remains elusive.
- Meanwhile, it is critical for ROK to enhance its own deterrence capability with the help of the U.S. and Japan. As South Korea needs to pursue integrated deterrence with the U.S., it has no choice but to further strengthen the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.

Panelists (in alphabetical order)

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