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I. Great Power Rivalry Reappears

Over the last decade, the most significant change in the international strategic environment has been the reemergence of a great power rivalry between the U.S. and its European and Asian allies on one hand and Russia and China on the other. This trend began in the second term of President Obama, with the Russian invasion of Crimea in early 2014 and the Chinese construction of a network of military bases in the South China Sea beginning around 2013. Since then, the trend has sharpened. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has locked the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies against Russia in a long-term struggle for the survival of Ukraine and future of European security. In Asia, tensions between Beijing and Washington have become worse, as both the Trump and Biden administrations pursued economic measures against China, and as China appears to be building military options to unify Taiwan and the mainland by force.

The reemergence of great power rivalry has important nuclear dimensions, increasing concerns about “strategic stability” – the nuclear balance among the great powers – and the risk of nuclear conflict. The Ukraine war has lowered the nuclear threshold. Russia has deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and threatened to use tactical nuclear weapons to discourage NATO intervention or assistance to Ukraine. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) – the last remaining arms control treaty limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals – expires in February 2026, and Russia has refused U.S. offers to negotiate a new treaty as long as the U.S. is assisting Ukraine. In the meantime, Russia

continues to develop an array of exotic nuclear delivery systems intended to overcome U.S. missile defenses, including hypersonic reentry vehicles, nuclear-armed submarine drones, and nuclear anti-satellite weapons.

China is pursuing an unprecedented nuclear build-up, including new strategic bombers, more advanced nuclear-armed submarines, and three new missile bases with more than 300 silos for solid fuel ICBMs with multiple reentry vehicles. According to U.S. Department of Defense estimates, China has more than 500 operational nuclear warheads as of May 2023 and will “probably have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030” (U.S. Department of Defense 2023a). Like Russia, China is also pursuing hypersonic reentry vehicles, anti-satellite weapons, and strategic cyber operations. Some analysts fear that China’s nuclear build-up will make it more confident that it can deter U.S. intervention in the face of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or increase the risk that a U.S.-China confrontation over Taiwan will escalate to nuclear use.

To address the reemergence of great power threats, the U.S. has introduced the concepts of “tailored deterrence” and “integrated deterrence” into its nuclear doctrine. According to the Trump administration Nuclear Posture Review, released in February 2018,

The United States will apply a tailored and flexible approach to effectively deter across a spectrum of adversaries, threats, and contexts. Tailored deterrence strategies communicate to different potential adversaries that their aggression would carry unacceptable risks and intolerable costs according to their particular calculations of risk and cost (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018).

The tailored deterrence concept was also adopted by the Biden administration in its October 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, saying,

Central to U.S. deterrence strategy is the credibility of our nuclear forces to hold at risk what adversary leadership values most. Effectively deterring – and restoring

deterrence if necessary – requires tailored strategies for potential adversaries that reflect our best understanding of their decision-making and perceptions (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2022).

Building on the concept of tailored deterrence, the Biden administration Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) also introduced the concept of “integrated deterrence,” which is based on the idea that traditional nuclear deterrence can be reinforced by non-nuclear capabilities. According to the NPR,

The role of nuclear weapons is well established and embedded in strategic deterrence policy and plans. Non-nuclear capabilities may be able to complement nuclear forces in strategic deterrence plans and operations in ways that are suited to their attributes and consistent with policy on how they are to be employed. A pragmatic approach to integrated deterrence will seek to determine how the Joint Force can combine nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities in complementary ways that leverage the unique attributes of a multi-domain set of forces to enable a range of deterrence options backstopped by a credible nuclear deterrent (Ibid.).

II. Implications for the Korean Peninsula

While the concepts of tailored deterrence and integrated deterrence were developed in response to great power rivalry, the U.S. has also sought to apply these approaches to the Korean peninsula, especially as North Korea has dramatically improved its ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities over the past decade. At the 45th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in October 2013, ROK Minister of Defense Kim Kwan-Jin and the U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel formally endorsed a bilateral “Tailored Deterrence Strategy Against North Korean Nuclear and other WMD Threats.” According to the joint communique, “This strategy establishes a strategic Alliance framework for tailoring deterrence against key North

Korean nuclear threat scenarios across armistice and wartime, and strengthens the integration of Alliance capabilities to maximize their deterrent effects.” (U.S. Department of Defense 2013)

The Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review is explicit that tailored deterrence means threatening the survival of the North Korean regime if it uses nuclear weapons:

For North Korea, the survival of the Kim regime is paramount. Our deterrence strategy for North Korea makes clear that any North Korean nuclear attack against the United States or its allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime. There is no scenario in which the Kim regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive. Further, we will hold the Kim regime fully responsible for any transfer of nuclear weapons technology, material or expertise to any state or non-state actor. North Korea relies on hardened and deeply buried facilities to secure the Kim regime and its key military and command and control capabilities. It uses underground facilities and natural terrain features to protect North Korean military forces. Consequently, the United States will continue to field a range of conventional and nuclear capabilities able to hold such targets at risk. In addition to ensuring the ability to impose intolerable costs on the Kim regime, the United States and allies have defensive and offensive capabilities to intercept and otherwise defeat North Korea’s missile capabilities, and thereby limit or preclude North Korea’s ability to conduct effective missile strikes (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018).

The Biden administration’s 2022 Nuclear Posture Review issued the same threat - “Any nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its Allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime. There is no scenario in which the Kim regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive.” (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2022)

While these threats are intended to deter North Korea from using nuclear weapons, they have not prevented North Korea from continuing to develop and test its nuclear and missile forces. North Korea has benefitted from the intensification of great power rivalry. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia and China had relaxed enforcement of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea and blocked efforts by the U.S. to impose additional UN sanctions in response to renewed North Korean ballistic missile tests. As U.S.-China tensions over Taiwan have increased, China has reverted to viewing North Korea as a strategic asset to tie down U.S. forces in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. At the same time, China remains wary that North Korean provocations could result in the U.S. deploying additional military assets in the Far East and strengthening trilateral security cooperation with the ROK and Japan.

The Ukraine war has resulted in a dramatic improvement in Russian relations with the DPRK, symbolized by President Putin's ceremonial visit to Pyongyang in June 2024, where the two leaders signed a mutual security pact. The precise dimensions of the relationship are not certain. North Korea has provided large quantities of artillery ammunition and some short-range rockets and missiles to Russia in exchange for oil and food. However, it is unclear whether Russia will provide North Korea with advanced conventional weapons (such as surface-to-air missile defense systems and fighter aircraft) and technology to assist North Korea's strategic capabilities, including nuclear submarines, ballistic missiles, and surveillance satellites.

Even without Russian assistance, however, North Korea will continue to develop its missile and nuclear capabilities. Like any nuclear power seeking a credible nuclear deterrent, North Korea requires a nuclear force that can survive a preemptive first strike, which the U.S. and ROK have threatened in the event of conflict. In response, North Korea is seeking to increase the size, mobility, and diversity of its nuclear delivery systems and decrease reaction time, including the development of nuclear-armed submarines, long-range solid-fuel ballistic missiles, and hypersonic reentry vehicles. Like any nuclear power facing conventionally superior forces, North Korea is threatening to deploy tactical battlefield

weapons to compensate for its conventional weakness and create options for limited nuclear use in the event of a major conflict – a North Korean version of the Russia escalate to de-escalate doctrine.

Recognizing that growing North Korean missile and nuclear capabilities represent increased threats, the Biden Administration has sought to strengthen extended deterrence, both to deter North Korea and to reassure South Korea. In April 2023, President Joe Biden and President Yoon Suk-Yeol issued the Washington Declaration, which committed to

Bolster[ing] nuclear deterrence and response capabilities on the Korean Peninsula, including the development of security and information sharing protocols; nuclear consultation and communication processes in crises and contingencies; as well as coordination and development of relevant planning, operations, exercises, simulations, trainings, and investment activities. In particular, the U.S. and ROK discussed joint planning and execution of ROK conventional support to U.S. nuclear operations as well as how to enhance visibility of U.S. strategic asset deployments around the Korean Peninsula (The White House 2023).

The Washington Communique also established a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) headed by officials from the National Security Council and the Blue House, which is intended to complement the ministerial-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultative Group (DESCG) established in 2016 and headed by the Departments of State and Defense on the U.S. side and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense on the ROK side.

In November 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and ROK Defense Minister Shin Won-Sik announced a “revised Tailored Deterrence Strategy.” (U.S. Department of Defense 2023b) This updated strategy includes enhanced consultations and joint planning under the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), deeper intelligence sharing, increased joint exercises (including deployment of U.S. strategic assets such as nuclear-capable aircraft and submarines), and greater cooperation on missile defense, space, and cyber operations.

A major element of Tailored Deterrence is temporary deployment of U.S. nuclear delivery systems to the ROK for exercises and U.S.-ROK conventional and nuclear integration (CNI). This would involve planning and exercises to integrate conventional ROK forces with U.S. nuclear operations, such as ROK fighter aircraft escorts to accompany U.S. strategic bombers in Korean airspace. These measures are steps towards NATO-style nuclear sharing, which would involve permanent deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea and arrangements for the U.S. to authorize the release of nuclear weapons for delivery by ROK nuclear-capable aircraft in a conflict. Up to now, the Biden administration has not supported NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangements with the ROK for several military, diplomatic, and political reasons. The Biden administration has not ruled out such arrangements in the future if the security situation on the peninsula becomes more threatening, but it has not specified what North Korean actions would trigger a decision to move toward nuclear sharing with the ROK.

III. Future of Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula

Since 1953, the US-ROK alliance has deterred major conflict on the Korean Peninsula, despite the dramatic development of North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities since North Korea first tested a nuclear device in 2006. Even lethal conventional attacks have ceased since North Korea torpedoed the ROK warship Cheonan in March 2010 and fired artillery barrages at Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010. From a strictly military standpoint, the combined forces of the U.S. and the ROK enjoy overwhelming nuclear and conventional superiority over North Korea, and the allies have taken measures to strengthen their military forces and enhance the credibility of extended deterrence.

No one can say with certainty whether these additional measures will be sufficient to deter North Korea in the future. Ultimately, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on the perceptions and calculations of Kim Jong Un, and we do not have clarity into his thinking. The key question is whether Kim Jong Un will be emboldened to be more aggressive because

of advances in his military capabilities – including a credible threat to attack the U.S. directly with nuclear weapons – and improvements in geopolitical conditions, such as closer relations with Russia and tensions between the U.S. and China. On balance, most U.S. experts and U.S. government analysts estimates believe that a full-scale invasion of South Korea, including the use of nuclear weapons, is much less likely than “coercive” diplomacy, which could include nuclear threats and limited conventional attacks on South Korea (Garlauskas and Gilbert 2023; National Intelligence Council 2023). In deciding whether to order a limited conventional attack, Kim Jong Un would have to weigh the value or benefit of such an attack against the risk that such an attack would lead to ROK and U.S. retaliation that could escalate into a broader conflict. Despite the new security treaty, Kim could not be confident of Russian military intervention on his behalf, and China is likely to oppose any North Korean provocation that would increase tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The upcoming November Presidential elections between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump casts a shadow on the future of Tailored Deterrence Strategy on the Korean Peninsula. If President Biden is re-elected, the U.S. is likely to continue its long-standing policy of seeking to denuclearize North Korea and opposing South Korean development of its own nuclear weapons. A second Biden administration will likely try to deter North Korea and reassure South Korea by taking additional measures under the terms of the Washington Declaration and the revised Tailored Deterrence Strategy. In the event of an increased threat from North Korea, however, a second Biden administration might be prepared to support NATO-type nuclear sharing agreement with the ROK and redeployment of U.S. nuclear forces in South Korea. The implicit threat that the U.S. and ROK may agree to NATO-style nuclear sharing and deployment could be used to pressure China to restrain North Korea from taking actions that might give the U.S. and ROK justification to establish NATO-style nuclear sharing, which China would see as a threat to its security interests.

If Donald Trump is re-elected, the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance and U.S. policies toward North Korea are uncertain, especially because appointments to key national security and foreign policy positions in the U.S. government are unknown. In his first term, Trump’s

policies were mercurial. He first threatened Kim Jong Un with a nuclear attack and a “bloody nose,” then agreed with Kim at the Singapore Summit in July 2018 on a “small deal” to suspend long-range missile tests in exchange for limiting joint U.S.-ROK military exercises. Then, he rejected Kim’s offer at the Hanoi Summit in February 2019 to lift most international sanctions in exchange for freezing and eventually dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear facility. Trump also quarreled with the ROK over collective burden sharing and agreed at the US-DPRK summit in Singapore in June 2018 to suspend large scale US-ROK joint military exercises in exchange for Kim Jong Un’s commitment to suspend long range missile tests.

So far, candidate Trump has not spoken publicly about his plans for the Korean peninsula if he is re-elected. According to a recent news report, Trump has mused privately with acquaintances that he might decide to explicitly abandon the goal of denuclearizing North Korea and offer instead to provide economic relief and financial incentives in exchange for North Korea agreeing to freeze its nuclear program and verifiably stop producing and developing new weapons (Ward 2023). Whether President Trump would go forward with such a proposal and whether North Korea would accept it are another matter. What is certain is that if a new Trump administration is seen as accepting North Korean nuclear weapons, weakening the credibility of U.S. security commitments to the ROK and relaxing U.S. opposition to South Korea nuclearization, it would substantially increase the likelihood of South Korea going nuclear. ■

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979-11-6617-776-7 95340

Date of Issue: July 5, 2024

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