

Implications for US Extended Deterrence and Assurance in East Asia

SHANE SMITH

NOVEMBER 2015



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Dr. Shane Smith is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Defense University's Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. His current research focuses on strategic stability and the role of nuclear weapons in Asia-Pacific affairs, extended deterrence, and North Korea's nuclear program. He is also a Special Advisor at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, where he helps shape and support a strategic engagement and applied research program aimed at reducing WMD dangers. In 2007, Dr. Smith helped launch the WMD Center's Program for Emerging Leaders and was the Program's Director from 2008 to 2012. He has taught national security and nuclear policy related courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder, the National Defense University, and at Johns Hopkins University. Before joining the WMD Center, Dr. Smith worked for former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter at the Harvard-Stanford Preventive Defense Project. He was also a Research Associate for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he coordinated two nuclear policy task forces, and a Research Assistant at the Russian-American Nuclear Security Advisory Council. He has published in edited volumes, academic journals, and leading newspapers. Most recently, he co-authored a chapter in Etel Solingen (ed.), *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and authored a chapter in Jeffrey Larsen (ed.), *Responding to Catastrophic Events: A Consequence Management Reader* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

IMPLICATIONS FOR US EXTENDED DETERRENCE AND ASSURANCE IN EAST ASIA	7
Introduction	7
Nuclear Weapons and the Stability of Deterrence	8
Extended Deterrence and Assurance Challenges	10
“Decoupling” 2.0	12
Stability-Instability Paradox Redux	13
Balancing Pre-war and Intra-war Deterrence Imperatives	14
The Other Side of the Deterrence Coin: Assuring Allies	15
The Impact of Three Future North Korean Nuclear Scenarios on Extended Deterrence and Assurance	19
Conclusion	22

IMPLICATIONS FOR US EXTENDED DETERRENCE AND ASSURANCE IN EAST ASIA

Introduction¹

US interests in East Asia are not new, but the global shifts in political, military and economic power from West to East make the region increasingly important. It is now common to hear US leaders say that the country's interests are "inextricably linked" to the Asia Pacific.² The rebalance or pivot strategy is a manifestation of US interests there, and strong alliances with both Japan and South Korea are fundamental to that strategy.³ A nuclear-armed North Korea challenges those alliances by stressing US extended deterrence commitments, which are at the heart of the alliance structure and the basis for the US presence in the region.

The unique challenge for extended deterrence is the need to convince an adversary that the United States is willing to accept high costs in defense of an ally, even though US vital interests are not necessarily at stake—they may be inextricably linked, but they are not innate. The United States would certainly have significant interests threatened by a conflict with North Korea, but for Pyongyang and its neighbors, national survival could very well hang in the balance. A nuclear-armed North Korea might attempt to exploit this apparent asymmetry of interests by raising the potential costs of a conflict for the United States in an effort to persuade it to accept an outcome on Pyongyang's terms rather than take on the threat of nuclear war.

Fear that the United States would be reluctant to run nuclear risks with North Korea, in turn, could lead to questions among US allies about the value of its security commitments. At a minimum, doubt over US commitments could strain the alliances and make cooperation in other areas of US interest more difficult. However, South Korea and Japan could also pursue independent measures to cope with a nuclear-armed North Korea. The worrisome array of actions they could take includes developing independent nuclear capabilities, aligning with China or Russia to help resolve the North Korean threat, and seeking some form of unilateral accommodation with Pyongyang.

North Korea's burgeoning nuclear program is already placing greater demands on US extended deterrence and also raising questions in Seoul and Tokyo about the robustness of

¹ This paper represents the author's personal views and does not necessarily reflect the views of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or any part of the US government.

² President Obama Addresses the Parliament of Australia, The White House, November 16, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

³ US Department of Defense, "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," January 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

US commitments. These challenges are likely to grow over the coming years, as North Korea appears poised to expand the quantity, quality and diversity of weapons systems in its arsenal in potentially dramatic ways.⁴ Keeping up with the requirements for extended deterrence and assurance is likely to test US policymakers and military planners for the foreseeable future.⁵ Failure to manage related challenges could have far-reaching strategic consequences.

This paper explores the geostrategic implications of a nuclear-armed North Korea—specifically, the challenges for extended deterrence and alliance relations—and the impact of alternative North Korean nuclear “futures.” First, it reflects on a more general debate about whether nuclear weapons reinforce deterrence relationships or embolden aggressive behavior, and what we might expect from North Korea as its nuclear capabilities grow. While it is impossible to know whether and how Pyongyang’s foreign policy would change, there are legitimate reasons for concern. The paper then discusses extended deterrence and assurance challenges in East Asia. It concludes with a discussion about the impact of different North Korean nuclear developments on those challenges over the coming years.

Nuclear Weapons and the Stability of Deterrence

There are two general ways to think about how nuclear weapons affect the foreign policies of the states that have them and their impact on deterrence. Kenneth Waltz and other leading scholars argue that nuclear weapons are inherently stabilizing. Their catastrophic potential bolsters deterrence relationships, and “when countries acquire the bomb, they feel increasingly vulnerable and become acutely aware that their nuclear weapons make them a potential target in the eyes of major powers. This awareness discourages nuclear states from bold and aggressive action.”⁶ If true, then there is little need to worry about the impact of a nuclear-armed North Korea on US extended deterrence. However, other analysts argue that nuclear weapons embolden some states to be more aggressive in pursuit of their political-military objectives. As Paul Kapur finds in the Pakistan case: “Nuclear weapons do enable Pakistan, as a conventionally weak, dissatisfied power, to challenge the territorial status quo with less fear of an all-out Indian military response.”⁷

Insights from recent scholarship suggest that the answer to how nuclear weapons might affect North Korea’s propensity for confrontation and therefore the stability of deterrence turns, in part, on two sub-questions. One, is North Korea a status quo or a revisionist power? That is, is it satisfied with the existing order or does it seek to change that order, using military force if

⁴ David Albright, “Future Directions in the DPRK’s Nuclear Weapons Program: Three Scenarios for 2020,” US-Korea Institute at SAIS, February 2015, <http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/NKNF-Future-Directions-2020-Albright-0215.pdf>. For what these capabilities might mean for North Korea’s emerging nuclear strategy, see Shane Smith, “North Korea’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy,” US-Korea Institute at SAIS, August 2015, http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NKNF_Evolving-Nuclear-Strategy_Smith.pdf.

⁵ For a discussion of emerging capability requirements and the need for sustained US leadership in East Asia, see Brad Roberts, “Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia,” *NIDS Visiting Scholar Paper Series, No. 1*, August 9, 2013, <http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/visiting/pdf/01.pdf>.

⁶ Kenneth Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2012-06-15/why-iran-should-get-bomb>.

⁷ For a case study on the impact of nuclear weapons on Pakistan’s behavior, for instance, see S. Paul Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability in South Asia,” *International Security* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 71–94.

necessary, to extend its interests and values? The idea is that, once acquired, nuclear weapons would reinforce Pyongyang's predisposition.⁸

At its core, North Korea appears to be a revisionist state. The Kim regime's political legitimacy has long been pegged to the stated goal of unification, which is enshrined in the country's constitution and the charter of the Workers' Party of Korea.⁹ Kim Jong Un made clear that nuclear weapons serve those revisionist aims when he stated that "Nuclear weapons are the sword that advances the cause of Korean reunification."¹⁰ Indeed, the North has already demonstrated its willingness to leverage nuclear threats in combination with both diplomatic and conventional military provocations to challenge what it contends to be objectionable political and territorial arrangements. It is reasonable to assume that those tendencies could grow along with the North's nuclear capabilities.

The second question stems from work in behavioral economics. Is North Korea's leadership risk averse or risk acceptant? The literature suggests that leaders might take greater risks when they face the prospect of pending losses in an increasingly desperate situation rather than for pure gains when things are going relatively well.¹¹ This has implications for deterrence on a couple of levels. On a macro level, with the exception of its nuclear weapons, North Korea is declining in relevancy compared with its modern and economically superior neighbors. It has fewer vested interests in a stable regional status quo that unevenly benefits others, including the United States and South Korea. Its leaders might look at trend lines in the region and decide that particularly bold actions are necessary to reassert control over their ability to shape future political outcomes. It would thus be unsurprising if the North used nuclear threats and provocations in an effort to generate instability that, in turn, might open opportunities to advance its interests. Statements out of Pyongyang suggest that its leaders are in fact thinking about how to exploit nuclear weapons to "dictate" international trends and regional relations.¹²

On a domestic level, perennial reports surface of internal rivals and purges in North Korea. For instance, after the public execution of Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un's uncle and the vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, North Korean media labeled him a traitor and suggested that other "anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional elements" will be rooted out.¹³ More recently, Kim Jong Un reportedly canceled a trip to Moscow in order to see to internal affairs. Shortly thereafter, Hyon Yong Chol, the minister of the People's Armed Forces, was

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, DC: The AEI Press, 1999), p. 25. Also see Sung Yoon-Lee, "North Korea's Revolutionary Unification Policy," *International Journal of Korean Studies* XVIII, no. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 121–37.

¹⁰ Alexandre Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy: What Everyone Needs to Know," Nautilus Peace and Security Network, December 16, 2014, <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/kim-jong-uns-nuclear-doctrine-and-strategy-what-everyone-needs-to-know/>.

¹¹ The seminal work for this research program is Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979), pp. 263–91.

¹² See Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy: What Everyone Needs to Know."

¹³ Adam Cathcart, "'Thrice-Cursed Acts of Treachery'? Parsing North Korea's Report on the Execution of Kim Jong Un's Uncle: An annotated guide to one of the most grandiose news bulletins ever released," *Atlantic*, December 13, 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/-thrice-cursed-acts-of-treachery-parsing-north-koreas-report-on-the-execution-of-kim-jong-uns-uncle/282339/.

ousted (some suggest that he was executed for treason) and replaced by the sixth minister since 2011.¹⁴ While North Korea watchers debate the meaning of such reports, they do portend a leadership that may face real internal challengers. At the very least, one could infer that the Kim regime's hold on power is not absolute and that it is at times willing to take presumably risky measures to (re)assert control.

A worsening domestic situation, of course, can lead to risky external behavior. Scholars have argued that states will sometimes engage in provocative behavior and even full-scale war as a diversionary tactic to deflect attention from domestic woes or to galvanize opposition to domestic challengers.¹⁵ This should be a familiar theme to most North Korean analysts since domestic motivations have long been considered a primary driver for North Korea's external provocations. For instance, some analysts speculate that securing the military's backing for the transition of leadership to Kim Jong Un from his father, Kim Jong Il, was a primary motivation for the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong island in 2010.¹⁶ Nuclear weapons could provide the North with added confidence that it can launch such diversionary provocations with relative impunity in the future.

The answers to these questions do not bode well for the stabilizing prospects of a nuclear-armed North Korea. However, it would be wrong to assume that increased confidence in its nuclear weapons will fundamentally alter North Korea's behavior. First, its leaders are not irrational or suicidal. We should not expect nuclear weapons to suddenly trigger a reckless drive toward unification or a nuclear attack from out of the blue, for instance. Second, North Korea has a long history of limited but violent provocations, ostensibly to either weaken, delegitimize and humiliate South Korea and the United States or to shore up domestic support. Nuclear weapons might make such conduct more frequent or intense with real implications for extended deterrence and assurance, but the difference in North Korea's behavior may be one of degree rather than a fundamental change.

Extended Deterrence and Assurance Challenges

It is important to consider extended deterrence and assurance challenges in the context of broader US strategic interests. Effective deterrence rests not only on the balance of capabilities but also on the balance of interests at stake in a particular conflict.¹⁷ The balance of interests is particularly important for extended deterrence because it faces a structural problem that sets it apart from more straightforward deterrence: it requires convincing an adversary that the United States is willing to accept high costs in defense of an ally even in situations where its national interests are not self-evident.

¹⁴ Alexandre Mansourov, "The Rise and Fall of General Hyon Yong Chol," *38 North*, July 14, 2015, http://38north.org/2015/07/amansourov071415/#_ftn1.

¹⁵ For recent work on this line of research, see Amy Oakes, *Diversionary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ For instance, see David E. Sanger, "US Implicates North Korean Leader in Attack," *New York Times*, May 22, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/world/asia/23korea.html.

¹⁷ Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1987).

What is the balance of interests? As mentioned above, the Asia Pacific region is increasingly important for American prosperity and global leadership. It is home to about 40 percent of the world's population and nearly 60 percent of global GDP, with economies that similarly represent about 60 percent of overall US trade.¹⁸ The region is also host to six countries with nuclear weapons programs, including North Korea; three of the world's six largest defense budgets; and six of the world's largest militaries. Moreover, overlapping rivalries and multiple territorial disputes across Asia also involve US allies.¹⁹

The US rebalance strategy is an expression of its growing interests in the region. Fundamental to that strategy and to the US regional presence are its alliances with both Japan and South Korea. As the 2012 Department of Defense *Strategic Guidance* specifies, “Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. We will emphasize our existing alliances, which provide a vital foundation for Asia-Pacific security.”²⁰ In a speech at the US Military Academy in 2014 on the use of force, President Obama went on to argue that the security of those and other allies is a core US interest that is worth fighting for.²¹

The United States may have significant interests at stake and the will to defend regional allies, but its national survival is unlikely to be threatened in a conflict on the Korean peninsula.²² For North Korea and its neighbors, survival may very well be on the line in a potential war. This apparent asymmetry of interests exposes the fundamental challenge for extended deterrence against a nuclear-armed North Korea: its leaders might think that by threatening nuclear attack, they can raise the potential costs of a conflict beyond what the United States is willing to accept and thereby persuade it to agree to an outcome on Pyongyang's terms.

Of course, North Korea has a long history of making threats ostensibly aimed at conveying its willingness—and not necessarily its capability—to impose and accept far greater costs than the United States. For instance, in the days following North Korea's seizure of the *USS Pueblo* in 1968, it threatened “genocidal blows” in response to a kinetic US response. Since the early 2000s, Pyongyang's over-the-top threats such as turning Seoul into a “sea of fire” have become almost commonplace. The problem today is that North Korea could potentially make good on

¹⁸ Brock R. Williams, “Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Countries: Comparative Trade and Economic Analysis,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 10, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁹ David J. Berteau, Michael J. Green, et. al., *US Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2012, p. 13, http://csis.org/files/publication/120814_FINAL_PACOM_optimized.pdf.

²⁰ Department of Defense, *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, p. 2, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

²¹ Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony, The White House, May 28, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

²² US regional priorities are often characterized as preserving a balance of power that prevents the rise of a hegemon or group of powers that would deny US access to the region; preventing military threats against the US homeland and its allies—defeating those threats, if needed; promoting and maintaining free and secure markets; stemming proliferation; and promoting democracy and human rights. See, for instance, Ralph Cossa, Brad Glosserman, et. al., *The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy for the Obama Administration*, Center for a New American Security, February 2009, p. 10, www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CossaPatel_US_Asia-Pacific_February2009.pdf.

such threats as its nuclear capabilities grow. This has a number of implications for extended deterrence that are discussed below.

“Decoupling” 2.0

During the Cold War, the United States extended security commitments to Western Europe that were ultimately backed by its strategic arsenal—and today, it still does. When the US homeland became vulnerable to Soviet nuclear weapons, many security experts on both sides of the Atlantic worried that leaders in Moscow might doubt US resolve. A common refrain, “Would the United States trade New York to defend Berlin, Washington for Bonn?” captured the dilemma of mutual nuclear vulnerability for extended deterrence. The fear that the US strategic commitment could be “decoupled” from its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies was a persistent concern for most of the Cold War.

Today, similar concerns are emerging as North Korea pursues intercontinental ballistic missiles, particularly the road mobile KN-08. If and when North Korea can target US cities with nuclear weapons, would the United States risk San Francisco, Los Angeles or Honolulu to defend Seoul or Busan? There is good reason to believe that North Korea’s strategy behind building intercontinental missiles is aimed at decoupling the US-South Korea alliance. As far back as the 1980s, during the early developments of the Taepodong missile, Kim Jong Il reportedly remarked, “if we can develop this we have nothing to fear. Even the American Bastards won’t be able to bother us.”²³

There is a new wrinkle to this old problem. Japan is first on North Korea’s nuclear target list, or so it has said.²⁴ This may be part of a “triangular decoupling” strategy. On one level, North Korean leaders might think that by threatening Japan, the United States would be forced to “choose” between allies and that it would be reluctant to risk Japan over a fight on the peninsula. On another level, North Korean leaders could think that nuclear threats would prevent Japan from supporting US efforts to defend South Korea. Indeed, the efficient and effective execution of the US non-nuclear extended deterrence commitments to South Korea involves logistical support from bases located in Japan—United Nations Command Rear is in fact co-located with United States Forces Japan on Yokota Air Base. The emerging dilemma was captured in a familiar way by one Japanese strategist who stated during a recent Track II Dialogue that “We are increasingly being asked to trade Tokyo for Seoul.” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has similarly made statements that suggest Japan’s consent to using bases located on its soil to defend South Korea should not be taken for granted.²⁵

²³ Reported by a defector and quoted in a number of publications from the 1990s. Terence Rohrig, *From Deterrence to Engagement: The US Defense Commitment to South Korea* (Lexington Books, 2007), p. 90.

²⁴ “North Korea states ‘nuclear war is unavoidable’ as it declares first target will be Japan,” *Express* (Tokyo), April 12, 2013. See also Max Fisher, “Here’s North Korea’s official declaration of ‘war,’” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2013.

²⁵ For a discussion of Abe’s comments, see Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Japan Chair Platform: Japan Matters for South Korea’s Security,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 10, 2014, www.csis.org/publication/japan-chair-platform-japan-matters-south-koreas-security-0.

During the Cold War, NATO allies did not face this kind of triangular decoupling problem. The bedrock of the NATO alliance was and is a collective defense agreement, whereby an attack on one is an attack on all. No such commitment exists between Japan and South Korea. To the contrary, political relations between the two countries are rocky at best and often spiked by open acrimony. While there has been recent progress toward trilateral talks and better information sharing, historical animosity between Tokyo and Seoul still hinders robust cooperation and dialogue regarding contingencies on the peninsula.

Stability-Instability Paradox Redux

In 1965, Glenn Snyder argued that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war provided for a certain level of strategic stability between nuclear adversaries. No leader would want to escalate conflict to the nuclear threshold for fear of crossing it. Paradoxically, however, stability at the high end of conflict could create overall instability by making lower levels of conflict relatively safe and thereby erode extended deterrence.²⁶

In the North Korea context, some experts fear that its leaders might see a survivable second-strike capability as a shield from behind which it can launch conventional provocations and war.²⁷ In short, a survivable second-strike might give North Korea's leaders confidence that they can manage the risks of escalation because nuclear weapons would deter a full retaliatory response from the United States and South Korea. As a result, North Korean leaders might calculate that they can launch a conventional offensive at some favorable time, if only to achieve limited objectives, before using the threat of nuclear attack to sue for peace on their terms.

Some analysts may be unconcerned about North Korea's conventional military capabilities and therefore indifferent to this threat. It is true that allied forces far outmatch those in North Korea, but Pyongyang's conventional threat cannot be easily dismissed. It is widely believed that North Korea's military strategy and operational concepts are based on conducting quick and decisive assaults that can present a *fait accompli* before the United States can get reinforcements to the peninsula. Once US reinforcements arrive, the more assured is North Korea's defeat. This strategy is evident in reports about North Korea's military posture. For instance, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that 70 percent of its forces are forward deployed to allow rapid invasion of the South in as little as 48 to 72 hours without further deployments or supplying. Those forces include approximately 650,000 troops, 8,000 artillery, 2,000 tanks and formidable special operations forces numbering around 100,000.²⁸ Of course, North Korea does not need to unify the peninsula to inflict a significant blow against the alliance. It could pursue

²⁶ Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1965), pp. 196–201.

²⁷ Joseph Bermudez interviewed North Korean officials and concluded that for its leaders, "detering the United States also creates the opportunity to reunify Korea by force and under their terms." Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Unconventional Weapons," in Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 183.

²⁸ The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *North Korean Security Challenges: A Net Assessment* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), p. 49.

much more limited aims, such as taking territory across the demilitarized zone or islands along the Northern Limit Line that it claims are in dispute.

As North Korea's confidence grows in its strategic deterrent—i.e., the ability to target major population centers in South Korea, Japan and the United States—it might even think that it could use nuclear weapons in a limited fashion. For instance, it might think that it could use nuclear weapons for psychological effects during a conflict by firing a demonstration shot; for area denial effects by targeting access points to North Korea or military ports in the South, such as the Port of Busan, where the US might otherwise disembark forces; or for operational effects by targeting military bases away from civilian population centers, such as air bases at Kunsan and Osan. Even the limited use of nuclear weapons, however, would be extraordinarily risky, if only because such use would most certainly increase the stakes of the conflict for the United States, South Korea and much of the world. But it may be a risk that North Korea is willing to run during a conflict in which survival of the regime is at stake; more so, if it has confidence in a survivable second-strike strategic deterrent.

Balancing Pre-war and Intra-war Deterrence Imperatives

Effective deterrence is often thought to require, as the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* states, “communicating to potential nuclear-armed adversaries that they cannot escalate their way out of failed conventional aggression.”²⁹ To be sure, the United States presents overwhelming military power to adversaries like North Korea. And, during conflict, it tends to apply its military superiority in a decisive and overwhelming fashion from the start. Keir Lieber and Daryl Press argue that it is precisely US military superiority and the way that it is employed that could incentivize a country like North Korea to use nuclear weapons early in a conflict.³⁰ The longer the conflict goes on, the more likely it is going to end very badly for the regime—and even on a personal level (think Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Slobodan Milosevic).

For North Korea, a sense of fatalism could be triggered even without the prospect of a decisive military defeat. Some observers believe that the regime is brittle—outwardly rigid and hard but if struck in the right spot, like a partial but humiliating military defeat, it could shatter or unravel. Early but limited use of nuclear weapons might be seen by North Korea's leaders as the best way to stave off that fate.

Unless the US and South Korean goal is regime change, one way to reduce the incentives for early nuclear use by North Korea and to restore deterrence during a conflict might be to have graduated military options and clearly communicated “off-ramps” that offer the regime viable alternatives to escalation. To be successful, however, these would likely need to be telegraphed well before a war breaks out. Signals of restraint and off-ramps are less likely to be received and trusted in the fog of war. The dilemma for deterrence is the potential of unintentionally signaling to North Korea's leadership that its nuclear weapons buy it space on the proverbial ladder of escalation and that it can manage the risks of low-level conflict. As Robert Jervis

²⁹ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Report 2014*, March 2014, p. 13, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf.

³⁰ Daryl Press and Keir Lieber, *Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century: Understanding Adversary Incentives and Options for Nuclear Escalation* (Monterey, CA: US Naval Postgraduate School, March 2013).

has argued, stable deterrence actually results from the fear of unmanageable escalation and instability.³¹ Without that fear, deterrence on the peninsula could give way to provocations and miscalculation. Once war breaks out, however, that fear provides Pyongyang with few incentives for restraint.

The Other Side of the Deterrence Coin: Assuring Allies

US allies are keenly aware of the extended deterrence challenges posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea. Nowhere is this more visible than in South Korea, where debate over whether to develop an independent nuclear capability or whether to request US redeployment of nuclear weapons to the peninsula has gained ground. A decade of polling from a number of sources suggests that a consistent majority of South Koreans support an independent nuclear program as well as the return of US nuclear weapons. Two separate polls conducted after North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013 found that nearly two-thirds of respondents (to date, the highest mark in available polling data) favor both of those strategies.³²

Conversations with many South Koreans suggest that this is partially driven by a frustration about the lack of alternative response options to North Korea's nuclear developments and provocations. However, others argue that it stems from anxiety over US security commitments. On one level, they point to observations that raise concerns about US retrenchment, such as economic and political morass, political discomfort with hegemony, a resurgence of isolationism in US politics, and a willingness to negotiate when "redlines" are crossed (for example, when Syria used chemical weapons). On another level, there is growing doubt about US willingness to use its nuclear weapons in defense of South Korea. For instance, a 2012 poll found that while South Korean public support for the US-ROK alliance was at an all-time high with a 94 percent approval rating, less than half of the respondents believed that the United States would use nuclear weapons even if the North attacked the South with nuclear weapons first.³³

Despite a significant portion of the population favoring nuclear weapons in South Korea, only a slow trickle of politicians and opinion leaders have publicly called for such actions. Most notably, former presidential candidate, founder of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and heir to the Hyundai conglomerate, M.J. Chung, argued, "South Korea may exercise the right to withdraw from the NPT [and begin to] match North Korea's nuclear program step by step."³⁴ Representative Shim Jae-cheol similarly reasoned that "the only way to defend our survival would be to maintain a balance of terror that confronts nuclear with nuclear ... We will have to push forward with ... redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons."³⁵

³¹ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

³² Wade Huntley offers a useful summary of these polls in "Speed Bump on the Road to Global Zero: US Nuclear Reductions and Extended Deterrence in East Asia," *The Nonproliferation Review* 20, no. 2 (July 2013), pp. 322–23.

³³ Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, and Kang Chungku, "The Fallout: South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea's Third Nuclear Test," Issue Brief no. 46, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, February 23, 2013.

³⁴ For a video of his keynote talk at the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, see <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/09/keynote-m.j.-chung-member-national-assembly-of-republic-of-korea/fv9t>.

³⁵ "Saenuri calls for nuclear capability to deter the North," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, February 19, 2013, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2967341>.

The reason for this divide between public opinion and the positions of political leaders could be due in part to a stronger appreciation within the political and strategic communities for the US alliance—flaws and all—and the damage that nuclear appeals would likely have on the relationship. However, as in any democracy, it would not be surprising to see political opinions begin to more closely reflect public opinion, particularly if North Korea continues to build up its nuclear capabilities or if confidence wanes in the US extended deterrent. Indeed, it is also worth keeping in mind that South Korea previously explored and invested in elements of a secret nuclear weapons program in the 1970s when it was concerned about US security commitments.³⁶

The United States has committed to strengthening extended deterrence and to assuring South Korea of US resolve in the face of a nuclear-armed North Korea. For instance, President Barack Obama and other senior government officials have made repeated statements obligating the full range of US capabilities, including nuclear weapons, to the defense of South Korea. A forum to jointly address future challenges to extended deterrence, the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee, was established in 2010 and the US-ROK Tailored Deterrence Strategy was signed in 2013, reportedly to jointly address the threat of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction programs.³⁷ To address lower-level provocations under the shadow of nuclear weapons, the US-ROK Counter Provocation Plan was developed that same year. There have also been highly visible joint military exercises involving the public overflight of US nuclear-capable bombers and the announcement to increase US missile defenses against the North Korean nuclear threat. Some South Koreans, however, are looking for firmer commitments, including an explicit declaratory policy about the conditions under which the United States would use nuclear weapons in their defense, and coordination such as a NATO-like nuclear planning group and sharing arrangement.³⁸

South Korea is also developing independent conventional capabilities and sending deterrence signals to North Korea, arguably to fill perceived gaps in US extended deterrence. However, this could lead to mixed deterrence messages and uncoordinated or unintended escalation. For instance, South Korea has developed what some call a “proactive deterrence” posture, which reportedly promises to “take prompt, focused, and disproportionate retaliatory (and perhaps even preemptive) actions in order to raise the costs to North Korea of small-scale attacks,” presumably before consultation or coordination with the United States.³⁹ It is also developing what has been labeled a “kill chain” system to swiftly detect, target and destroy North Korean nuclear and missile assets during a crisis.⁴⁰ It is unclear in the literature when or how the “kill chain” would

³⁶ Jonathan D. Pollack and Mitchell B. Reiss, “South Korea: The Tyranny of Geography and the Vexations of History,” in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 254–92.

³⁷ Karen Parrish, “US, South Korea Announce ‘Tailored Deterrence’ Strategy,” *Armed Forces Press Service*, October 2, 2013.

³⁸ For a discussion of some of these sentiments, see Chang Kwoun Park, “ROK–US cooperation in preparation for hostile actions by North Korea in possession of nuclear weapons,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no. 4 (2010), pp. 499–513.

³⁹ Abraham M. Denmark, “Proactive Deterrence: The Challenge of Escalation Control on the Korean Peninsula,” *Korea Economic Institute: Academic Paper Series*, December 2011, http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/proactive_deterrence_paper.pdf.

⁴⁰ James Hardy, “North Korea, Beware of Seoul’s Mighty Missiles,” *National Interest*, July 2, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/north-korea-beware-seouls-mighty-missiles-10792>.

be employed and whether pre-coordination with the United States would be required. South Korea has also signaled its intent to target North Korea's leadership in a conflict. It recently released a video of cruise missile tests, stating: "The cruise missile being unveiled today is a precision-guided weapon that can identify and strike the window of the office of North Korea's leadership."⁴¹ More bluntly, one Ministry of Defense spokesman responded to North Korea's threat to attack the South with a pre-emptive nuclear strike by saying "If North Korea is to attack the South with its nuclear weapons ... Kim Jong Un's regime will cease to exist on the face of Earth."⁴²

Japan is also wrestling with uncertainty about the future of US security commitments in a changing regional and global environment. Some analysts argue that Japan is at a critical juncture in its security policy, driven both by North Korea's nuclear program and the rise of China.⁴³ In the minds of some regional experts, the two threats are not mutually exclusive. North Korea is sometimes considered the "cat's paw" in a Chinese strategy to push the United States out of the region, antagonize and distract Japan, and pave the way for China's regional expansion.⁴⁴ Regardless of the actual link between China and North Korea, the rising costs of US regional deterrence against multiple nuclear threats heighten Japan's long-term anxiety over US security commitments.⁴⁵

North Korea's growing capabilities and threats generate three immediate kinds of concerns in Japan. First, North Korea could launch non-nuclear provocations against Japan while using nuclear threats to deter retaliation. Second, Japan would be a primary nuclear target during a conflict that it cannot control on the peninsula. Indeed, many Japanese take Pyongyang at its word when it states that "Japan is always in the [nuclear] cross-hairs of our revolutionary army and if Japan makes a slightest move, the spark of war will touch Japan first."⁴⁶ Third, once North Korea can target the US homeland with nuclear weapons, it can intimidate Washington in a way that leaves Japan vulnerable to coercion. For instance, one former Japanese defense official reportedly opined about the implications of a nuclear-armed North Korea, "we cannot completely rule out the possibility of Japan's being cut off from US nuclear strategy."⁴⁷ Faced with these

⁴¹ "South Korea unveils missile it says can hit North's leaders," *Reuters*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/14/us-korea-north-missile-idUSBRE91D07P20130214>.

⁴² K.J. Kwon, "Under threat, South Koreans mull nuclear weapons," *CNN*, March 18, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/18/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear/>.

⁴³ Ariana Navarro Rowberry, "Advanced Conventional Weapons, Deterrence and the US-Japan Alliance," Brookings Institution, December 2014, www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2015/01/06-advanced-conventional-weapons-deterrence-us-japan-alliance-rowberry/advanced-conventional-weapons-deterrence-and-the-us-japan-alliance--rowberry.

⁴⁴ Noah Feldman recently characterized North Korea as a "nuclear proxy" for China in advancing its regional interests. Noah Feldman, "Why China's OK with North Korea's Nuclear Nuttiness," *Bloomberg Views*, May 21, 2015, www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-05-21/why-china-s-ok-with-north-korea-s-nuclear-nuttiness.

⁴⁵ Yukio Satoh, "Agenda for Japan-US Strategic Consultations," in *Major Powers' Nuclear Policies and International Order in the 21st Century*, Report of the NIDS International Symposium on Security Affairs 2009 (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2010), pp. 21–34.

⁴⁶ "North Korea states 'nuclear war is unavoidable' as it declares first target will be Japan," *Express* (Tokyo), April 12, 2013.

⁴⁷ As quoted in Richard J. Samuels and James L. Schoff, "Japan's Nuclear Hedge: Beyond 'Allergy' and Breakout," in Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2013–2014: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013), p. 245.

challenges, Japan has engaged in intense debate over new policies to address a changed and changing security environment.

Calls in Japan for a more robust US nuclear presence or for independent capabilities are quieter than in South Korea. Public opinion and institutional opposition to nuclear weapons continue to shape Japanese discourse on such issues. However, a growing number of US and Japanese analysts argue that Japan's indefinite renunciation of nuclear weapons cannot be taken for granted; it would likely consider changing course if the security environment deteriorated or if it lost faith in the US extended deterrent.⁴⁸ As Richard Samuels and James Schoff suggest, since the 1950s, Japan has more or less made clear that it reserves the right, and maintains the capacity, to develop its own nuclear arsenal if the situation warrants it.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Japan is already exploring other measures to augment the US deterrent, arguably in areas where it sees US assurances lacking. For instance, there is now debate in Japan over developing a conventional strike capability that could, as Prime Minister Abe reportedly told the National Diet, “hit enemy bases in accordance with the changing international situation.”⁵⁰ A primary justification for such capabilities is the need to conduct preemptive counterforce operations against a nuclear-armed North Korea.⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, these discussions raise regional concerns about a fundamental shift in Japan's military posture partly because the debate is taking place in the context of Japan's reinterpretation of the constitution to enable “collective self-defense” and the 2013 *National Security Strategy* that argues for the need “to first and foremost strengthen its own capabilities and the foundation for exercising those capabilities.”⁵² Not only do these developments have the potential to aggravate Japan's relations with both South Korea and China, but it is also not clear in the literature how the changes and new capabilities would work within the structure of the US-Japan alliance. A lack of coordination between the two could lead to dangerous and unhelpful escalation during conflict on the peninsula.

In an effort to enhance consultation on future challenges and the role of US extended deterrence, the US and Japan established the Extended Deterrence Dialogue. There have also been repeated statements from US political leaders recommitting the full range of US capabilities to the defense of Japan. The United States has also committed additional capabilities to signal its willingness and ability to uphold its security commitments, such as the deployment of additional missile defense assets to the region, including plans to increase ground-based interceptors for national missile defense; deployment of additional Aegis-equipped warships to the West Pacific; and the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery to Guam. These may not be sufficient for assuring Japan in the future, however, as it faces an increasingly nuclear-capable and unpredictable North Korea.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 233–64.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Japan Eyes Cruise Missiles to Attack N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 21, 2013, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/02/21/2013022101139.html.

⁵¹ See Narushige Michishita, “Japan's Response to Nuclear North Korea,” *Joint US-Korea Academic Studies* 23 (2012), pp. 99–112.

⁵² Japanese Ministry of Defense, *National Security Strategy* (December 17, 2013), p. 14, emphasis added.

⁵³ For more on the debate about capability requirements for extended deterrence and assurance of Japan in particular, see Roberts, “Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia.”

The Impact of Three Future North Korean Nuclear Scenarios on Extended Deterrence and Assurance

North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy offers three scenarios for where North Korea's nuclear capabilities could be in five years.⁵⁴ The low-end scenario posits a North Korean nuclear stockpile of roughly 20 weapons with yields of around 10 kilotons (kt) and minimum advancements in delivery systems that are limited to regional targets. The medium-range scenario suggests the North's arsenal grows to 50 weapons, with yields in the 10–20 kt range and the possibility of new designs achieving 50 kt. In this case, North Korea has also made advances that allow it to mount warheads on road-mobile missiles of intercontinental, intermediate and short-range distances with moderate confidence in those delivery systems. The high-end scenario estimates North Korea with 100 weapons and an average stockpile yield of around 20 kt, but an increasing number of weapons that are capable of achieving 50 kt yields. It has fairly high confidence in its missile systems and is also able to deploy battlefield or small so-called tactical weapons. The different scenarios would have different implications for extended deterrence.

The low-end scenario would continue to present decoupling challenges but primarily through triangulation—i.e., increased targeting of Japan in an effort to compel the United States to “choose” between allies or to peel Japan away from supporting US efforts to defend South Korea. This indirect threat to the United States has two implications. First, it places a premium on trilateral cohesion and cooperation among the United States, Japan and South Korea. Trilateral progress in areas such as information sharing, crisis coordination and missile defense could be helpful, but the main problem is political. As long as there is a political divide between Seoul and Tokyo, North Korean leaders might see a vulnerability that can be exploited.⁵⁵ US pressure may be needed to bring Japan and South Korea closer together to present a united front against provocations. Pressing too hard for trilateral cooperation, however, could lead to a domestic backlash in one or both of the countries, given the state of political relations between the two, which could further expose the trilateral gap and also affect US bilateral relations.

Second, the indirect nature of the threat against the United States in the low-end scenario would be less likely to provide North Korea with a high level of confidence that it could use nuclear weapons as a shield from behind which it could launch major provocations. Presumably, its leaders would be less willing to really test the durability of a strategic deterrent comprised of a relatively small number of warheads on relatively vulnerable and low-confidence delivery systems that cannot reach their primary opponent, the United States.⁵⁶ Pyongyang might nonetheless believe that nuclear threats against Seoul and Tokyo provide sufficient high-end

⁵⁴ Joel Wit and Sun Young Ahn, “North Korea’s Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy,” US-Korea Institute at SAIS, February 2015, <http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/NKNF-NK-Nuclear-Futures-Wit-0215.pdf>.

⁵⁵ As Michael Wheeler finds, “security relationships are first and foremost political relationships. If the overall political relationship is not healthy, it is unlikely that the security relationship can remain durable and strong.” Michael O. Wheeler, *The Changing Requirements of Assurance and Extended Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010), p. 48.

⁵⁶ That is ostensibly why Kim Jong Un has identified the ability to strike the United States as a requirement for deterrence. Kim Jong Un at the March 31, 2013, plenary meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea Central Committee, *Korean Central Broadcasting Station* in Korean, April 1, 2013, available at http://www.ncnk.org/resources/news-items/kim-jong-uns-speeches-and-public-statements-1/KJU_CentralCommittee_KWP.pdf.

stability to engage in low levels of provocation similar to the ones that it launched in 2010—provocations that might fall below the presumed threshold for US action. Since US extended deterrence is generally aimed at higher levels of conflict, the United States would need to continue to invest in coordination, planning and joint communication with South Korea and Japan to signal to Pyongyang that the allies can effectively respond to and dominate at all levels of conflict. Such coordination might entail US allies, ultimately backed by the United States, taking on increasing and leading roles in responding to a broader range of North Korean provocations. As allies adopt related policies and build required capabilities, such as independent and potentially preemptive strike options, the risks of confused deterrence messages and uncoordinated or unintended escalation could grow in the absence of close and consistent consultation and planning.

For the medium-range scenario, North Korea would be able to target the United States as well as large population centers in South Korea and Japan, while its mobile missiles could provide it with a more secure second-strike capability. The higher yields could also provide it with greater confidence in its ability to destroy intended targets, while the increased number of weapons might enable it to launch one salvo and retain enough weapons to threaten additional attacks. This scenario has a number of implications for extended deterrence beyond those discussed in the first scenario.

First, the decoupling challenge is more direct than in the low-end scenario. As such, there would likely be a swell of emphasis on both US offensive and defensive capabilities, such as conventional precision-strike and national missile defenses, to reduce if not eliminate US vulnerability to North Korea's limited arsenal and thus reinforce the US intention to defend its regional allies.⁵⁷ In turn, a buildup of conventional strike capabilities that could provide preemptive or first strike options along with missile defenses is likely to have a negative impact on US relations with Russia and China since both express concerns that those capabilities could be turned against their strategic deterrents.⁵⁸

Second, if North Korea's confidence in its strategic deterrent against the United States grows, it might be more willing to take on the risk of larger-scale provocations and even major conflict. The North might calculate that a more robust strategic deterrent would force allies to respond in limited ways for fear of escalation and, in effect, offer the regime intra-war opportunities to sue for a satisfactory resolution of the conflict. However, North Korea would still face a conventionally superior adversary backed by a larger and more capable nuclear arsenal. Despite having enough weapons for multiple attacks, its leaders might conclude that the suicidal threat of attacking major population centers would ring hollow except in the grimmest situations—situations the regime itself would want to avoid.

The high-end scenario suggests that North Korea would have a much larger nuclear arsenal that not only offers a robust strategic deterrent, but also battlefield or tactical weapons that could be

⁵⁷ Brad Roberts, "On the Strategic Value of Ballistic Missile Defense," *Proliferation Papers*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, June 2014.

⁵⁸ For a recent discussion about Chinese and Russian concerns, see Richard Weitz, "Arms Racing in Strategic Technologies: Asia's New Frontier," Hudson Institute, May 3, 2015, www.hudson.org/research/11307-arms-racing-in-strategic-technologies-asia-s-new-frontier.

used to offset conventional inferiority and provide a graduated set of target and yield options. This would offer North Korea the greatest level of confidence that it could achieve its goals in major conflict and, therefore, it might be more willing to launch a major offensive. It might even believe that it could use nuclear weapons for operational objectives to defeat allied forces.

Of the three scenarios, this one would clearly put the most pressure on US extended deterrence. While US nuclear weapons would likely play an increasingly prominent role in extended deterrence, as North Korea builds a larger and more capable arsenal, this scenario would be the most likely—but not necessarily the only—one to prompt reconsideration of US nuclear requirements and force posture in the region to ensure escalation dominance for extended deterrence purposes and the ability to quickly defeat a range of North Korean nuclear threats, if needed.

How the different scenarios might affect US assurance challenges in the region is more difficult to calculate. Analysts often reference Lord Denis Healey, the United Kingdom's defense secretary from 1964 to 1970, to highlight the difficulties of assurance. During the Cold War, he wrote that “it takes only 5% credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but 95% to reassure the Europeans.”⁵⁹ The requirements for assurance and extended deterrence may differ markedly. Allies can request resources for the purposes of assurance that are much greater than the resources that are thought to be necessary for deterrence.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, for allies that face an immediate existential threat, like a North Korea that is armed with an increasingly capable and destructive nuclear arsenal, the failure of the United States to address their concerns can lead to serious questions about the value of US security commitments and their exploration of alternatives that are not necessarily in US interests.

It would be reasonable to expect the security-related requests from US allies in East Asia to grow as North Korea's nuclear arsenal increases. David Santoro and John Warden point out the overarching assurance challenge looking forward when they write that the United States will need to “balance its desire to reduce allied anxiety against other interests. There are some allied interests that the United States—rightly—does not deem worthy of risking war. But if the gap between the United States and its allies becomes too large, allies will lose faith in US assurance, which could have disruptive consequences.”⁶¹ Striking the right assurance balance would be increasingly important if and when allies develop independent policies and capabilities to cope with conflict below the apparent threshold for US action or to augment US deterrence in the progressively dangerous scenarios posited above.

Allies are already seeking greater assurances that the United States has the offensive and defensive capabilities and resolve to promptly respond to and defeat North Korea's nuclear threats against them. This demand signal is only likely to grow, starting with the first scenario discussed above, but with increasing resonance for the second and third scenarios, potentially

⁵⁹ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

⁶⁰ For a useful summary of this challenge, see Justin V. Anderson and Jeffrey A. Larsen with Polly M. Holdorf, “Extended Deterrence and Allied Assurance: Key Concepts and Current Challenges for US Policy,” *INSS Occasional Paper*; US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies, September 2013.

⁶¹ David Santoro and John K. Warden, “Assuring Japan and South Korea in the Second Nuclear Age,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015), p. 149.

including requests for the United States to forward deploy so-called tactical nuclear forces. Calls would also likely become louder for either increases in the US conventional force posture or US support for allies to develop independent capabilities to address the prospect of provocations from an emboldened North Korea. Accordingly, US allies could be expected to request deeper policy coordination as well as joint planning, potentially on US nuclear matters. Lastly, allies would increasingly look for signs of political resolve from US leaders, such as presidential affirmations of the US commitment to defend allies against nuclear threats and coercion, but there could also be heightened requests for a more explicit US declaratory statement should North Korea use nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

If North Korea continues to grow its nuclear arsenal in terms of both quantity and quality, the pressures on US extended deterrence will surely mount. The size, shape and character of its arsenal will have consequences for the types of challenges and risks that we will face. It will also impact the type of assurances allies seek from the United States and what the United States will ask of its allies in the future. Meeting those demands will have both political and financial costs that could come at the expense of other domestic, regional and global priorities. How the United States and its East Asian allies manage those interests and whether they respond effectively to the deterrence challenges of an evolving North Korean nuclear threat will have far-reaching consequences for the US rebalance strategy and for geostrategic relations in the region more broadly.

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US-Korea Institute at SAIS
Johns Hopkins University
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 6th Fl
Washington, DC 20036
www.uskoreainstitute.org