

Considerations Bearing on a Possible Retraction of the American Nuclear Umbrella Over the ROK

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American extended nuclear deterrence has, for some years, performed a number of functions in Northeast Asia. Any detailed list would have to include the following:

- 1) Protecting the ROK, via deterrence, from another huge and very destructive conventional war. It was the Eisenhower administration that initially announced that a nuclear response would be likely for another war like the one in Korea, and made plans and nuclear weapons deployments accordingly. That threat has never been abandoned as the US has never adopted a no-first-use posture on nuclear weapons. What it did do, after the Cold War, was to remove its nuclear weapons stored in the ROK and all nuclear weapons, except on SLBMs, from its ships at sea.
- 2) Compensating the ROK for not developing nuclear weapons and huge conventional forces with an attack orientation. The US-ROK alliance was meant by Washington to provide a degree of control, of restraint, on the ROK to prevent it from starting or provoking a war. This was a serious concern from the start of the alliance, in the Syngman Rhee era, (and dated back to before the the Korean War). The US provided a convincing level of protection against North Korea and China, and the ultimate component was the nuclear umbrella.
- 3) Offsetting the superiority in conventional forces the North enjoyed for years, which persisted at least partly because of American restraints on South Korean military development. The nuclear umbrella restricted the political leverage the North could gain from its conventional military superiority. Thus it was a notable component of containment of the North.
- 4) Offsetting the North Korean nuclear program and the North’s eventual development of nuclear weapons, deterrence that benefited both the ROK and Japan.
- 5) Helping reassure Japan (as did the alliance and USFK) that the US will not “lose” South Korea to forces hostile to Japan and threatening to its security.
- 6) Reassuring Japan that the US would not retreat from Northeast Asia – the same reassurance to Japan conveyed by keeping American forces in the ROK.
- 7) Adding to deterrence of attacks on Japan. This has partly compensated Japan for not developing nuclear weapons, and also has allowed Japan to contain (and mostly avoid) what would otherwise have been a very divisive domestic political debate about nuclear weapons, the constitution, large conventional forces, etc. That contributed to the national consensus behind the Yoshida Doctrine emerged which, with its successors, has shaped Japan’s foreign policy and national security strategy.
- 8) Discouraging development of nuclear weapons by Japan – supplementing the US nuclear umbrella for Japan in doing this. Restraining Japan’s military capabilities, the renationalization of its security policy, by deterrence of a direct attack and by maintaining a congenial regional system for Japan therefore contributed to stabilizing the entire region.
- 8) Adding to American power projection capability in the region for

purposes of containment and regional security management. American nuclear deterrence, directly and via deterrence for the ROK, helped secure access for US forces to bases in Japan. Thus this was a major contribution to US hegemony.

Many of these no longer apply or are much less relevant now. The threat of a huge conventional war from a North Korean attack is now much smaller, in large part because of US and ROK military superiority. The ROK has not pursued nuclear weapons for several decades. While it now has a growing superiority in conventional forces, this is primarily to take responsibility for its own defense – the dominant ROK policy on the North for some time has been engagement. What remains is the possibility that even a successful conventional war would still be very costly and destructive, making deterrence of it a major ROK concern. Having a US nuclear umbrella for the ROK to reinforce deterrence of threats to Japan is less necessary for the time being but is not something Japan pays no attention to. Reassuring Japan about the durability of the US military presence in the region and its commitments to its friends there is also less necessary as well as easier. The reassurance now flows from the greater integration of US and Japanese military forces and the American desire to sustain USFK several different contingencies – the US military presence in Korea is not simply linked to protecting Korea and in having more projected missions looks much more durable.

However, US extended nuclear deterrence is still deemed somewhat or strongly useful for offsetting the North Korean nuclear weapons program, discouraging development of nuclear weapons by Japan (and potential imitators), deterring *potential* threats to Japan from China and Russia, easing Japan's domestic defense debate, and sustaining the US power projection capability and related hegemony in East Asia.

This can be annoying because the extended nuclear deterrent is not without problems. For instance, nuclear weapons are very limited military assets due to the potency of what has been termed the nuclear taboo or the tradition of nuclear nonuse. This is particularly true for the US because its massive conventional military superiority makes resorting to nuclear weapons even more difficult to justify. Currently in East Asia, this is reinforced by the weakness of Russia and the limitations of China as a great power – they pose no major immediate threats that would plausibly require using nuclear weapons in response. In addition, South Koreans are now very reluctant to see grave harm done to the North – the North Korean threat is downplayed, with many South Koreans seeing North Koreans as poor relations who will not attack the South. All these factors make US use of nuclear weapons against North Korea very unlikely, even if Pyongyang used a nuclear weapon against the ROK or American forces in the area. Then there is the complaint that American nuclear weapons and the nuclear umbrella provide a rationale for the North Korean nuclear weapons program, for China's continuing modernization of its nuclear weapons, and for China's opposition to the US alliances in East Asia. Thus nuclear weapons are not an ideal way to sustain American influence in East Asia.

Nuclear deterrence has an inherent credibility problem, and extended nuclear deterrence makes that problem greater. It is therefore surprising that American extended deterrence for Korea, or for Japan, is often considered fairly important, not something to be readily traded away. The underlying problem appears to be that American extended nuclear deterrence *is woven into East Asian international politics and US relations with East Asia*. In the eyes of various governments, it is one of the salient characteristics of a satisfactory status quo. (There is something similar about the situation in Europe as well but it seems to be fading.)

But at the same time, the extended nuclear deterrence for American allies helps make the status quo appropriately flexible. For instance, it has helped cushion the impact of, and thus make possible, the rather placid rise of the ROK, China, and Japan in relative economic and military strength and influence. Very significant systemic adjustments of this sort have taken place without unduly disrupting the entire regional system.

While critics or governments like China have long insisted that better security arrangements (and overall political arrangements) in East Asia could readily be developed, there is little evidence that the region's states could agree on any alternative and good reason to suspect that the quarrels and strains of trying to do so would be harmful and dangerous. The American dominated arrangements that still operate in the region have precluded such stresses and strains in East Asia and the related domestic political turmoil that might result.

The most disturbing aspect of the current Northeast Asian security arrangements is the present situation in, and with respect to, North Korea and its continuing alienation from everyone else in the area. This situation has been contained for some time despite steps by Pyongyang that could have been very disruptive. Nevertheless, grave instability, due to deterioration of the North Korean situation or further North Korean provocations, remains a possibility. In short, while the situation has been kept under control the containment of North Korea always seems delicate. Under these circumstances the uneasiness that would automatically emerge about any major proposed or actual shifts in regional security arrangements, and perhaps about even minor shifts, whether or not they were directly connected to the North Korean problem, would be very great. And furling the US nuclear umbrella would be considered a major shift by various governments, cause for concern and even alarm.

In the equivalent situation in Europe at the end of the Cold War, the eventual (interim) solution involved in part altering very little of the basics: US forces stayed and so did American nuclear weapons; NATO remained as did the dominant American role in it, as did NATO's identity as an alliance; so did NATO's commitment to nuclear deterrence, and NATO's membership. Everything eventually changed, but slowly and usually rather cautiously. This is almost certainly how all the governments concerned would feel about major shifts in regional and national

security arrangements in East Asia, and particularly Northeast Asia – they should go slowly and cautiously, with the most potent elements the last to be disturbed.

This is the perspective from which to assess any suggested trade of the US nuclear umbrella for major steps by North Korea. The following considerations would be very important. First, the nuclear umbrella would ideally help to offset uneasiness about other possible changes – steps toward unification, for example, or a collapse of the North, or an end to the US-ROK or US-Japan alliances, or just a major decline in the role of the US in regional security affairs. This suggests that removal of the nuclear umbrella should come late in the process of resolving the conflict between North Korea and the ROK and US and adjusting regional security relationships accordingly. This would require that the nuclear umbrella be treated, even by North Korea, as valuable for getting through the transition period (in the way the North has sometimes described the US military presence in the ROK). The North might consider it a useful constraint on Japan and China, for example.

In regard to more immediate concerns, the nuclear umbrella cannot simply be traded for the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and programs. They are only part of what makes North Korea a provocative and dangerous problem. The North disrupts regional security not just by what it does but because of what it is. Both would have to begin to be fundamentally altered as part of the tradeoff.

But all this would inevitably be tied into questions about what the future importance and influence of the US in Northeast Asia and East Asia should then be – especially in security management. Dropping the nuclear umbrella just for Korea would require some agreement about the US role; The relationship of the nuclear umbrella to that role: Crucial? Symbolically vital? Modestly important? A relic of the past? How to adjust regional security management accordingly.

There are other complications. One would be that US extended deterrence for the ROK can not readily be eliminated. The US will continue to be devoted to democracy and human rights, and thus to the health and well being of the world's democracies, particularly large and important ones like Japan and the ROK. It will also remain committed to nuclear nonproliferation. Practicing deterrence with these in mind will directly or indirectly involve the possibility of nuclear retaliation unless the US adopts complete nuclear disarmament. If so, how credible can a renunciation of the American nuclear umbrella over South Korea really be, particularly to a government like North Korea's which is so deeply mistrustful of US intentions.

In the same way, how can a regional nuclear umbrella be eliminated when it rests on a massively *global* nuclear capability? As noted, the US withdrew its nuclear weapons from the peninsula in 1991 but North Korea still worries about a nuclear attack. The US does not need to keep nuclear weapons in East Asia to deliver highly accurate nuclear attacks anywhere in the region, from thousands of miles away. And many of the nuclear weapons the US withdrew from its navy were stored and could

readily be reinstalled. The US also has many other stockpiled nuclear weapons for planes, cruise missiles, etc. Analysts have long noted that pledges of nonuse or no first use of nuclear weapons can not be taken seriously because they are unlikely to be honored if the face of a grave attack. Why should a US pledge to not retaliate with nuclear weapons for, say, a nuclear attack on Japan or the ROK, be taken as inviolate? The only reliable way to eliminate American extended nuclear deterrence is to eliminate American nuclear weapons. But that would make the proposed tradeoff even more sensitive and provocative.

To get North Korea to where it feels less threatened by American nuclear forces and surrenders nuclear weapons capabilities, it would be much easier to begin by moving a long way toward a more peaceful and secure regional system *despite* the continuing existence of nuclear weapons and extended nuclear deterrence. Those nuclear capabilities would have to be shifted into a very reserved or recessed configuration, so that the nuclear deterrence involved is also *very recessed*. Nuclear deterrence in the regional system, extended or not, should a deep background phenomenon, not salient, in relations among participants in Northeast and East Asian international politics.

This was the basic recipe used at the end of the Cold War. A massive relaxation of the political conflict came before the great cutback in the military confrontation and the diminished salience of nuclear deterrence in providing security for many states and societies, allowing nuclear arsenals to drop sharply and most nuclear weapons being removed from high alert status.

If this is unacceptable to North Korea, the US could at least agree to removing any vestiges of its capabilities for using nuclear weapons actually still in place in the region. But this would have to take place in a gradual fashion, and the price would have to be considerable North Korean transparency about its nuclear program and weapons. That alone makes such a deal difficult to imagine. And to fully ease the situation the North (for suitable incentives) would have to:

Eliminate its nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons program;

Adopt a less confrontational posture toward the ROK, particularly along the DMZ

Curb or eliminate its ballistic missile program

End exports of proliferation-related technology and materials.

It is turning out to be easier to deal with fears in Japan and the ROK that they are no longer important enough to the US to be worth defending. This fear is really an artifact of a narrow realist conception of alliances which is incompatible with contemporary relations among democracies. If modern liberal democracies operate under a democratic peace and see the spreading of democracy as very important for their national security, they will not abandon one when it is attacked by nondemocratic governments or other elements. It will be no easier to credibly eliminate the East Asian alliances in fact than to credibly eliminate the deterrence used in sustaining them – even without a formal alliance the US would be highly

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likely to help defend the ROK if necessary, even if the nuclear umbrella were removed in some symbolic way.