



A nuclear future and the evolution of the military dynamic on the Korean peninsula

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KEY POINTS

- South Korea, supported by the US, will continue to adjust to North Korea's force posture, capabilities and actions.
 - North Korea will continue to seek areas of military advantage including developing its nuclear posture.
 - The historic trend suggests that South Korea will adopt nuclear weapons as conventional counterforce is inefficient and there are risks to over-reliance on the US.
- North Korea's nuclear program continues unabated and there is little prospect of a resolution to this seemingly intractable issue. The Kim regime, contrary to international law, is developing and testing a series of new missile and nuclear capabilities including more survivable missiles and tactical nuclear weapons that are increasingly difficult to defend against. At the same time, South Korea is investing in a series of conventional capabilities aimed at deterring and defending a North Korean nuclear attack. Consequently, there is increasing concern in the policy and academic discourse about strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Yet, the historic nature of this arms dynamic on the Korean Peninsula is often lost in the commentary. In reality, neither the peninsular military balance nor the nature of the US-South Korea alliance are static. This has resulted in changing arming practices and shifts in the strategic relationship between North Korea, South Korea and the US thereby producing alterations in the nature of stability on the peninsula.

By looking at the past, this paper explores how these three countries have historically reacted to military asymmetries or capability advantages between the parties. It argues that South Korea's reaction to North Korea's nuclear capabilities fits within a pattern of South Korea responding to the shifting strategic threats it faces. In essence, South Korea may be introducing new capabilities to counter the North, but this type of response is nothing new and does not necessarily demonstrate a more assertive South Korean defence posture. Moreover, although South Korea has increasing levels of strategic and operational autonomy, the US still plays a vital role in influencing the level of stability on the peninsula. The long-term trend however suggests that a South Korean nuclear capability is more likely than ever before.

North Korean Superiority & US reliance

Following the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, South Korea was wholly reliant on the United States for the provision of military materiel. Through a series of force improvement packages, the US provided South Korea with the equipment Washington felt was necessary to deter the threat from North Korea. This was achieved both by transferring equipment from extant US units on the Peninsula and by addressing specific force requirements such as anti-air capabilities through the provision of direct military aid and later foreign military sales.

The North Korean threat was not the only criteria that the US used to determine the type of capabilities it provided. Although South Korea needed sufficient power to deter North Korea, policymakers in Washington were extremely wary of providing it with the capacity to undertake independent offensive operations. The US used their control over the provision of military capabilities in order both to ensure stability on the peninsula and that South Korea would act in concert with the United States' strategic interest.

The US sought to limit South Korea's freedom of action in specific spheres. In the land and to a lesser extent in the air, the US further hardwired their influence by the integration of US command and control over ROK units. However, in the navy the US did not have officers on board Korean ships and hence instead chose to limit the type and number of capabilities that South Korea could possess. A good example of this was the late 1960s when a US intelligence estimate highlighted an emerging gap between the North

and South Korean navies. The North Korean navy had substantially strengthened its warfighting capacity. It introduced a new class of missile-armed patrol boats, two capabilities that the South Koreans did not possess nor could counter.

Elements within the US were very reluctant even in the late 60s and early 70s to provide South Korea with weapons that could provide them with the ability to project too much power toward the North or even allow them to conduct operations against US regional allies such as Japan. Therefore, when North Korea gained this missile capability, there was some debate about what the US should provide South Korea. This debate went on long enough to force Seoul to look to the French to provide missiles (this was one of the first times South Korea went away from the US to provide weapons) which eventually forced Washington into providing a nascent, matching missile system.

South Korea's Military Response

From a South Korean perspective, the absolute reliance on the United States for the provision of equipment was not sustainable. Policymakers in Seoul increasingly felt that their strategic freedom of movement was been constrained and that Washington was not wholly responsive to their strategic concerns.

In the late 1960's North Korea began to increase its military pressure on the South and a series of events served to strengthen this perception in Seoul. In 1967, North Korea sank a South Korean patrol boat in a dispute over maritime rights. A year later, a 31-man North Korean special operations team infiltrated the Demilitarised Zone and attacked the South Korean presidential compound in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to assassinate Park Chung-hee, the South Korean president at that time. A few days after, the North Korean navy captured an American intelligence gathering ship, the USS Pueblo. Then in October/November 1968, a 120-strong North Korean SOF team used the sea to infiltrate the west coast of South Korea resulting in a lengthy and bloody manhunt. South Korea felt that Washington's response was not sufficiently robust and that the US prioritized regional stability over South Korea's strategic interests.

These events in combination with alterations in the US force posture in East Asia propelled South Korea towards pursuing both its own defence industrial capacity and initiating a series of indigenous force development programs. These programs started from a low base and while they did not alleviate South Korea's reliance on the US, they did provide South Korea with the impetus to pursue their own force development program.

These programs also revealed the importance of North Korea's force posture in South Korean thinking. The South Korean military did not pursue explicitly offensive capa-

bilities and instead sought to react to and often match the capabilities of North Korea. This type of reactive arming or force development characterizes much of South Korea's approach to deterring North Korea in this period.

The maritime domain again provides a good example of this line of thinking. In the 1960s, the North Korean navy procured a number of conventional attack submarines. Although the US deemed South Korean possession of a matching capability unnecessary and advocated and actually provided a surface-based anti-submarine solution, the South Korean military aggressively pursued a conventional submarine capability of their own. Once Washington rejected their request, they went to the British and ultimately Germany to develop their own submarine capability. For South Korea, the ability to counter North Korea was not the only objective. Regardless of operational necessity, Seoul saw the need to match North Korea in terms of like-for-like platforms.

The End of the Cold War and Gradual South Korean Conventional Superiority

As the Soviet Union collapsed, North and South Korea were set on two divergent paths. North Korea became economically weaker and in losing their primary patron lost their supply of relatively modern military capabilities. Hence, the North Korean military both lost its relative level of conventional superiority over the South and the impetus in the conventional arming dynamic on the peninsula.

What emerged was an increasing conventional gap between South Korea and North Korea. While North Korea maintained a substantial numerical advantage in terms of land forces, South Korea's military became increasingly technology-focused. Force development goal centered on pursuing precision capabilities and ensuring interoperability with the US by introducing more advanced network-based command and control systems.

South Korea was no longer only reacting to changes in North Korea's operational capability but was proactively changing the balance of power on the peninsula by ensuring their forces leveraged the technological benefits that their advanced economy could support.

Although the US further lost influence over the direction of South Korean force development, they continued to possess several levers of control. The US retained and continues to retain operational control of both the US and South Korean forces in wartime. This provided Washington with a powerful tool through which to manage unwanted escalation. They also used the alteration of US troop levels on the peninsula as a means of persuasion. Finally, while South Korea could now build increasingly sophisticated weapon systems and had the capacity to procure systems from third parties, they remained reliant on the US for vital weapons components/systems such as radars and com-

mand and control networks.

However, while North Korea may have lost the impetus in terms of the peninsula's arms dynamic, it retained the initiative by actively pursuing strategic and operational effects. In order to meet specific political or strategic goals, North Korea built upon a long history of low-level attacks on South Korea to conduct a series of actions that fell under the threshold of war but still challenged the military posture of South Korea and the US.

These actions manifested in multiple domains. Including a number of naval engagements off the west coast of the peninsula notably the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in 2010. The use of limited but still deadly military force including the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong-do, a South Korean-controlled island close to North Korean waters, and the frequent use of cyber-attacks and electronic warfare to disrupt South Korean activities and civil society.

Importantly, following each of these actions, South Korea and US forces acted to close off avenues of advantage that North Korea exploited. They did this by re-prioritising defence procurement, modifying procedures such as changing rules of engagement and altering long-held deterrence postures. In sum, South Korea and the US have shown themselves willing and able to strengthen their defence posture in relation to North Korean actions.

This responsiveness to North Korean actions was in evidence following the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do. After receiving incoming North Korean fire, South Korean artillery responded in kind and in line with their rules of engagement by targeting North Korean units involved in the attack. However, military planners deemed this response insufficient for deterrent purposes and in 2011; South Korea declared a new proactive deterrence doctrine. This shifted deterrence away from a focus on denial, i.e. absorbing and then defeating a North Korean attack and instead emphasized disproportionate retaliation in response to any attack. In 2013, South Korea and the US agreed on a Combined Counter-Provocation Plan that placed South Korea in the lead in responding to low-level North Korean attacks and provocations. It also incorporated consultations with the US to prevent unwitting escalation and alliance entrapment. This plan allowed for quicker responses to limited North Korean actions and enabled the operationalization of South Korea's new deterrence doctrine.

Events in 2015 tested this new approach, following a period of heightened tension along the demilitarized zone North Korea fired anti-aircraft and artillery rounds at a South Korean speaker that was broadcasting propaganda across the DMZ. South Korea retaliated with sustained 155 mm artillery fire. While aimed at a vacant area near North Korean forces, it was a disproportionate response, designed to demonstrate a new South Korean resolve in

response to North Korean attacks.

A Nuclear North Korea and a Conventional Response

North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities pose a deterrence and defence dilemma for South Korea. One option is to develop an independent nuclear capability, the second is to rely on the US to deter with its own nuclear weapons and the third is to develop an independent conventional counterforce capability supported by the US.

The first two options are currently unpalatable to South Korea. Although public and political support for an independent nuclear capability is growing, it poses strategic, political and economic risks to South Korea. Similarly, full reliance on the US nuclear deterrent is not optimal given the entrapment and abandonment risks it poses.

Hence, South Korea has since 2012 pursued an integrated conventional counterforce plan. This has three key elements, the Kill Chain strategy, the Korean Air and Missile Defense system (KAMD) and the Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation strategy (KMPR). The Kill Chain strategy requires the detection of imminent North Korean missile attacks and the subsequent destruction of North Korean missile launch infrastructure to prevent or blunt a North Korean attack. The KAMD is a still in development, layered missile defence system. The KMPR is a deterrence by punishment concept, first announced in 2016, that involves targeting North Korean leadership facilities following any North Korean attack.

This combined operational concept both hedges against the risk of North Korean attack and US abandonment

and entrapment. It does this by raising uncertainty in the minds of North Korean leaders about whether any nuclear or missile attack would be successful and by providing Seoul with a degree of an independent operational capability.

This concept is a natural evolution of South Korean defence planning. While this concept includes preemptive and punishment elements, South Korea's defence posture has been moving in this direction in line with the North Korean threat. Moreover, hedging against alliance risk has been a component of South Korean force development since the 1960s. However, South Korea remains reliant on the US for the provision of critical capabilities within its conventional counterforce capability. While this reliance may be diminishing as South Korea procures more intelligence, surveillance and strike assets, conventional counterforce while still difficult is much more effective with the US than without.

Some concerns do emerge from this concept; the primary one is viability. Conventional counterforce is a challenging problem with manifest operational and technological problems that need to be overcome for it to work. By shortening launch times and producing a multitude of increasingly survivable launch platforms, the developmental trajectory of North Korea's nuclear program only serves to increase this challenge.

Not only is the possibility of failure clearly suboptimal, in terms of deterrence the uncertainty of conventional counterforce may encourage North Korean leaders to take a risk and gamble on its fallibility in the event of a crisis.

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