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Tailored Deterrence: Influencing North Korean Decision-Making

By Michael Raska

Synopsis

With strategic realities on the Korean Peninsula becoming more “fluid” or multi-faceted with multiple threat dimensions, defence planners in the US-ROK Alliance have been rethinking existing strategies for responding to different levels of threats posed by North Korea.

Commentary

SINCE ASSUMING power four years ago, Kim Jong-un’s signature policy has centered on the “Byungjin Line” - simultaneously pursuing the production of nuclear weapons and the development of the national economy. The Byungjin Line has effectively underscored North Korea’s three main national security objectives: (1) preserving the current authority structure under the leadership of Kim Jong-un; (2) improving the country’s dysfunctional struggling economy; and (3) deterring “foreign adversaries” from taking actions which could threaten the regime.

In this context, North Korea’s recent military reforms have also reflected a mutually supporting dual-track approach. On one hand, North Korea has aimed to maintain the credibility and operational readiness of its large, forward-positioned, but technologically-obsolete conventional forces; while improving its asymmetric deterrence capabilities: from nuclear WMD programmes, ballistic missiles, and increasingly cyberwarfare.

Spectrum of Threats

At its core, North Korea’s nuclear programme serves multiple functions such as ensuring regime survival and ideological control under the Kim Dynasty by fostering

a constant fear of war among its population, deterring an attack by technologically-superior conventional forces of the United States and South Korea (ROK), and providing Pyongyang with political and diplomatic leverage for 'coercive campaigns' against all of its neighbours but especially South Korea and China.

From the US-ROK perspective, the spectrum of threats generated and driven by the North Korean regime has been without parallel. Notwithstanding North Korea's military logistics shortages, largely outdated equipment, and inadequate training, its ability to conduct limited-scale military provocations with little or no warning, especially near the demilitarised zone (DMZ) and along the disputed maritime boundary – Northern Limit Line - in the Yellow Sea, cannot be underestimated.

On one hand, the key challenge is ascertaining North Korea's threshold for limited conflicts, asymmetric attacks, and provocations such as the August 2015 DMZ landmine incident, 2014 cyber-attacks against Sony Pictures Entertainment, or the 2010 artillery shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island. These attacks, coupled with North Korea's efforts to upgrade select elements of its conventional and special operations forces, demonstrate North Korea's political willingness to take risks as well as capacity to inflict significant damage on South Korea, just below a threshold of overwhelming US-ROK retaliation that would risk Kim Jong-un's regime survival.

Meanwhile, North Korea is accelerating, expanding and modernising its deployed missile forces consisting of close-, short-, medium-, and intermediate-range systems, including the development of road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and solid-fueled short-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). The ultimate aim is to couple these missile systems with miniaturised nuclear warheads for ballistic missile delivery.

In North Korea's strategic calculus, this capability not only solidifies deterrence against US-ROK military responses or attempts to "overthrow the regime", but perhaps more importantly, continue to polarise South Korea's political spectrum and in doing so, divide the US-ROK Alliance.

Searching for New Strategy

During the 1993-1994 first nuclear crisis, the Clinton Administration considered preemptive air strikes on North Korea's nuclear facilities and ballistic missile sites. The US planned to launch cruise missiles and send F-117 stealth fighters to destroy the plutonium reactor site at Yongbyon, and deny Pyongyang the capability to procure nuclear weapons. At that time, six F-117s were deployed by the US Air Force at the Kunsan Air Base. The plans, however, were eventually rejected given retaliatory risks and escalation pressures that could lead to an all-out war.

In 2006, renewed calls emerged in the US for a surgical strike on North Korea and its ballistic missiles and associated facilities, particularly in the wake of an imminent ballistic missile launch of the long-range Taepo-Dong 2 missile. By then, however, North Korea had reached nuclear weapons capability. Since then, US-ROK defense planners have been searching for a new defense strategy with relevant operational concepts, which would allow greater flexibility, adaptability, and autonomy under conditions of strategic uncertainty.

In March 2011, South Korea's Ministry of Defence announced a new force modernisation plan – "Defence Reform 307", which introduced the concept of "Proactive Deterrence" as a response to North Korean asymmetric attacks - the sinking of the ROK Navy ship CheonAn and artillery attack on the Yeonpyeong-do Island. In similar future crises, the ROK would no longer rely on "passive" deterrent (deterrence by denial), but will immediately retaliate by using prompt, focused, and proportional retaliation (deterrence by punishment).

Tailored Deterrence Strategy

At the operational level, "Proactive Deterrence" has been embedded into the "2013 Combined Counter-Provocation Plan (CCP)" that provides a series of options for a joint response, principally under South Korea's lead with the assistance of US forces, to lower level North Korean provocations short of all-out war. Its principal weakness, however, is that the CCP depends significantly on the intervention of third parties (i.e. Russia and China) to control escalation in case U.S.-ROK responses would trigger a North Korean counter response.

At the same time, US-ROK officials have been rethinking strategic deterrence against North Korea's WMD programmes. In 2013, they signed the bilateral "Tailored Deterrence Strategy" that "establishes a strategic Alliance framework for tailoring deterrence against key North Korean nuclear threat scenarios across armistice and wartime, and strengthens the integration of alliance capabilities to maximize their deterrent effects."

While details of the strategy remain classified, Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti, Commander of the US Forces Korea, noted that "the strategy focuses on options that raise the cost of North Korean WMD or ballistic missile use; deny the benefits of their use; and encourage restraint from using WMD or ballistic missiles. The strategy provides bilaterally agreed upon concepts and principles for deterring North Korean WMD use and countering North Korean coercion".

Press reports indicate that it contains options for preemptive strikes in case of imminent use of North Korea's nuclear weapons, while providing US nuclear umbrella into formal defence planning processes of the US-ROK Alliance. The key challenge, however, will be the ability of the US-ROK forces to distinguish the indications and warnings associated with an impending North Korean asymmetric or limited conventional attack in real-time, particularly as North Korea edges closer to road-mobile ICBM capabilities armed with miniaturized nuclear warheads.

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