

*The Role of the United States in the Future of Northeast Asia
in the Wake of the North Korean Nuclear Test*

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Introduction

In the most fundamental sense, the U.S. security role in Northeast Asia is no different in the wake of the North Korean nuclear test from what it was before. The United States will continue to be the most powerful nation present in the region and will continue to have vital political, economic and security interests that will drive it to continue to play the role of regional balancer or stabilizer for the foreseeable future.

The military balance on the Korean Peninsula itself has not been changed by the DPRK test, nor would it be fundamentally changed even if the North were believed to have a truly deliverable weapon. The latter would, of course, raise the ante not only in terms of the threat to South Korea, but most especially to Japan and U.S. forces there given the substantial Nodong missile force in the North's inventory. A workable Taepodong II missile would expand the North's reach substantially, but even in that case, to put it in its crudest terms, the balance of forces ensures that if North Korea started a war, we would finish it.

Nonetheless, the test does alter the situation in some important ways, and one of the challenges for the United States—and for the other countries of the region—is to rise to the occasion to manage the new situation constructively. Handled well, the net effect could be to strengthen the American role and the prospects for peace and security of the region. Mishandled, the net effect could be to diminish U.S. influence over time, and to generate forces toward a much less certain future for all concerned.

The military balance

Now, and for any foreseeable future, North Korea cannot sustain a war. But what it has been able to do for a long time, and what it probably will be able to do for some time to come, is to credibly threaten to kill hundreds of thousands of people in South Korea—not just Koreans, but also the hundred thousand or so American civilians in the Seoul area every day as well as thousands of others there participating in the vibrancy of the modern-day ROK. It can threaten this with its long-range artillery and short-range missile force arrayed near the ROK-DPRK border within range of Seoul and protected in mountain storage areas. (Some have suggested new technologies may eventually be able to neutralize those weapons systems effectively before they could wreak anywhere near that level of damage, but until that is a “known fact,” it is prudent to assume the North still has that capability.)

It does give one pause to recall that no nuclear weapons state has ever launched a war against another nuclear weapons state. The nuclear standoff in the Cold War was governed importantly by the appropriately acronymed MAD (mutually assured destruction) balance between two more or less comparably huge nuclear powers. But even with a nuclear-capable state that does not possess a huge nuclear arsenal, one would not lightly take the risk that the situation could be controlled. What confidence could one have that an attack on such a state would lead to careful measuring by that state of the dangers of escalation? How can one safely assume that even a *non*-nuclear attack with sophisticated conventional weapons would be responded to with only conventional weapons? If such a nation—North Korea, in this case—thought it was about to be

defeated and perhaps destroyed, employment of nuclear weapons, if they were available, would certainly be an option.

In this sense, a proven, deliverable North Korean nuclear weapons capability would potentially increase the level of casualties from a DPRK attack, perhaps significantly, and even a reasonable belief that Pyongyang had such a capability would certainly raise the risk to a ground counteroffensive in the wake of an initial North Korean attack. On the other hand, since the United States has the capacity to retaliate in force beyond anyone's wildest nightmares, and since the North is well aware of this, there is little reason to think that Pyongyang would start a war, bringing nuclear weapons into play. Deterrence works—both ways.

So, except in the most extreme conditions—or unless attacked first, no leader in the ROK or the United States would give serious consideration to attacking the North and one has to believe that the same holds true for the leadership in Pyongyang.

At the same time, while the North's nuclear test might suggest that, if not today then tomorrow, the North will have a deliverable nuclear weapons capability and that its deterrent is thus "even stronger" than before, I believe that, even if by accident or miscalculation, we were to get into a war with Pyongyang, the odds of launching a decisive attack on the North are even greater now in order to knock out its war-fighting capability and bring such a war to an end as quickly as possible.

So, one conclusion I would draw is that, in terms of such matters as the American extended nuclear deterrence, if anything the North's nuclear test makes the U.S. role

more relevant than ever. That is to say, it is crucial in this situation, whatever one's current estimate of where the North is along the scale of delivery capability, to credibly reassure American allies in the region that an attack of any sort on them would be met with a firm and immediate U.S. response, and especially that a nuclear attack—under whatever circumstances—would be met with devastating and effective retaliation.

Alliances

This does, however, then lead us directly to a discussion of U.S. alliances with Korea and Japan, their current status, and their future prospects.

With Japan, a combination of factors, including most immediately the North Korean nuclear issue but also the uncertainties introduced by the rise of China, have led to a strengthening of the alliance relationship with the United States over the past decade. An important dimension of that strengthening has not just been a growing role for Japan within the alliance, but the growing importance that the U.S. security assurances remain as credible as before. If there is any doubt in Japan that the United States would retaliate forcefully to an attack on Japan—due to an unwillingness, for example, to put American cities at risk—this must be put to rest. It is not simply a matter of words; it is a matter of the most vital U.S. national security interest that an attack on Japan, whether conventional or unconventional—including nuclear, would be met, as I have said, with a devastating response from the United States. If we failed to do that, not only would the political, economic and security world we now depend on so greatly come to a sudden end, but the United States would lose all credibility regarding its future security role in

the region, and with it perhaps most of its influence and ability to protect its interests and itself. This is not a position any President of the United States would, or could, adopt.

With South Korea, while the same principles apply, there is a much greater question today about where the alliance is heading. Doubts have arisen about whether Washington and Seoul agree about what the alliance is for and how it should function. We are told that, after a four-year effort, a new bilateral “vision statement” has been agreed upon defining the purposes of the alliance in the post-Cold War world. But it is described as “plain vanilla”—meaning that it is couched in terms of overarching principles and vague generalities, and one has to wonder whether that will be compelling enough to hold the alliance together in the future. Particularly if the new “vision” is not widely publicized and made convincing to publics in both countries, the fraying of the alliance we have already seen could lead to its eventual unraveling.

Here the North Korean nuclear test may actually serve a useful purpose. Although Pentagon officials have basically said that the test changes nothing—more or less using the arguments I have made—and that, for example, plans for transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of Korean forces to Korea between 2009 and 2012, it is possible that enough has changed in political and psychological terms to make both the U.S. and the ROK pause and review recent developments—and alter course. Some have suggested that the change in American Defense Secretaries might also facilitate such a review.

One has to hope so, not because anyone disagrees with the principle of transferring wartime OPCON to Korea, but because the way this has arisen and is being carried

forward is contributing to a serious undermining of the alliance, all protestations by the two governments to the contrary. I do not think this situation is irreversible, but without some review and revision of current plans, when taken together with other factors that have weakened the sense of common purpose and mutual commitment, I see the alliance in potential peril.

So, while the North Korean nuclear test may not have changed the fundamentals of the military balance, if it causes people to consider the larger value of the alliance, it could help provide a basis for some necessary course corrections.

China

Finally, since the state of Sino-American relations will be crucial to the future security picture in the region, let me say a word about the U.S. relationship with China in the wake of the test. North Korea seems to have calculated that, as angry as China might be at such a direct flouting of Beijing's warnings not to test, the PRC would not take—or permit—steps that threatened Pyongyang's viability. To date, at least at that broad level of generality, such an estimate would seem to have been proven correct.

But where the North may have erred is in not seeing the degree to which this pushed China close to the edge of a decision to take steps that could, in fact, risk instability in the DPRK. In my view, that became a real option in Beijing for the first time, and, although the PRC did not choose it this time, a second test might well push China over that edge.

Even now, however, one consequence has been that, while China still looks to the U.S. to “do enough” in Six Party Talks to ensure the North is presented with a reasonable

proposal, what is “reasonable” in Beijing’s eyes may have shifted slightly toward the U.S. view and, in the meantime, the level of cooperation with sanctions against the North probably goes further than Pyongyang anticipated. The unprecedented Chinese support for two UNSC resolutions condemning North Korea within four months (and it is possible that the first such instance—after the July missile tests—had some impact on the North’s decision to proceed with the nuclear test) signals an important new dynamic at play.

As a result, the test has intensified what was already a fairly high level of Sino-American cooperation, certainly with respect to North Korea but perhaps more broadly as well. While I do not support the idea of explicit U.S.-PRC discussions about sustained steps to weaken the DPRK regime, in his very interesting article in the latest *Freeman Report*,¹ Jon Wolfstahl makes a suggestion with which I strongly agree when he calls for more open dialogue with China about future scenarios that could include changes that take place in the North as a consequence of the North’s actions and the world’s response.

At the same time, the United States needs to rethink its approach to demanding an “early harvest” at the Six Party table before taking reciprocal steps. While the willingness to negotiate this time is better than the “you broke it, you fix it, then give us a call” response to the HEU issue in October 2002, Washington’s argument is still that the North needs to earn the trust of the international community by taking steps first. That’s a reasonable enough position in the abstract, but the problem is that it is not likely to succeed. That isn’t to say that we should not seek substantial steps by the North early on, and those

¹ Jon B. Wolfstahl, “China’s Newfound Flexibility toward North Korea,” *Freeman Report*, November 2006 (<http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/frv06v11.pdf>).

reported in the press seem sensible. But if we want the North to comply, we need to be willing to take substantial steps of our own in parallel. That's what is called "negotiation."

The concern extends beyond this particular case. The North's nuclear test should be a reminder that it is not so hard to build a bomb, and while the North Korean issue may be geographically isolated, at least for now, the example we set in dealing with it and seeking to roll it back will resonate elsewhere.

That means not making undue concessions. But it does mean taking reasonable stands rather than being mesmerized by the illusion that we can simply use pressure to achieve our goals, holding out only the promise of good things if the other side first complies. By all means use pressure, but use it in conjunction with a plausible negotiating strategy.

Conclusion

In sum, the North Korean nuclear test has not had a harmful effect so far on U.S. interests or substantially changed the U.S. role in Northeast Asia. But the situation is not static. If we do not seize the moment to press the advantages that have been created for us, we will not only have squandered an opportunity presented by the North Korean test to consolidate our relations with our allies and with China, but we might ironically find ourselves relatively isolated and cast in the role of spoiler. There is no reason for the United States to allow that to happen, and every reason to ensure it doesn't.

