



Nuclear dilemmas to die for

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Takeaways

- **Crisis instability on the Korean peninsula entails risks of both inadvertent and nuclear escalation from North Korea during a crisis or limited military conflict.**
- **The pressure to escalate is exacerbated by the significant asymmetry in military capabilities between North Korea on one side and the U.S. and South Korea on the other.**
- **The military doctrines and postures of all three adversaries, as well as the geography of the peninsula and limits on North Korean intelligence and surveillance will continue to affect Kim Jong Un's incentives for a nuclear first-strike.**

INTRODUCTION

The number of North Korean missile tests the last couple of years has spiked dramatically. To bolster its nuclear forces, North Korea claims to have successfully launched both a reconnaissance satellite and the country's first nuclear-armed submarine in the fall of 2023. Although it remains to be seen to what extent they are operational, these developments indicate a rapid advancement of the North Korean weapons programme. Additionally, North Korea recently abandoned its past policy of reunification with the South.¹ This has led some analysts to suggest Kim Jong Un's behaviour since the failed Hanoi summit in 2017 indicates that it is not a question of *if*, but rather *when*, he will go to war.²

There is undoubtedly conflict potential on the Korean peninsula, but recent communi-

cation by the regime does not equate to a decision by Pyongyang to solve its problems with military power. However, what inevitably follows North Korean provocations is further tension and unease in Seoul, Washington, Tokyo and beyond about the potential of a conflict breakout. What is the danger of such a conflict going nuclear? The answer is that it is quite low, though unfortunately higher than many believe. Key features of the relationship between North Korea and the United States-South Korea alliance create a significant risk of escalation in a crisis or limited military confrontation. All the while, the potential of a crisis or limited war erupting is present.

Compared to established nuclear powers, emerging nuclear weapons states in asymmetric adversarial relationships – like North Korea – face stronger incentives for pre-emption and prevention through nuclear use, and dilemmas that can rationally favour the use of nuclear weapons. This carries implications for both the practice of deterrence and risks of nuclear escalation. Theoretically, there are two paths to North Korean nuclear use that stand out as relevant, namely inadvertent or deliberate escalation.³ Pyongyang may escalate inadvertently as a response to a perceived attack on its nuclear forces, even if South Korea or the U.S. never intended for the act to cross this threshold. Alternatively, Pyongyang could escalate deliberately – likely desperately – for coercive or instrumental purposes, such as trying to force its adversaries to back down in a conflict.

The pressure dynamics behind inadvertent escalation are undoubtedly present on the Korean peninsula.⁴ The peninsula is characterized by a long-standing and acute security dilemma, all parties' doctrines and capabilities indicate they place a premium on offensive military action, and the 'fog of war' would likely hit North Korea very quickly if a conflict broke out. As for incentives for deliberate escalation, it is plausible that North Korea will experience incentives to escalate for both instrumental and coercive purposes. North Korean prospects of military victory in a conventional war with the U.S. and South Korea are negligible. If a conflict breaks out, a nuclear weapons launch may present itself as the one and only option left on the menu for an outgunned North Korean

leadership with very limited prospects for survival.

Spiralling in the name of self-defence

The decisive source of escalation pressure for North Korea is an ongoing, intense security dilemma. It is driven by perceptions of insecurity on both sides, and subsequent difficulty of distinguishing between offensive and defensive actions by an adversary:⁵ Escalation pressure is created by mistrust and worst-case assumptions about an adversary's motivations and intentions. There are good reasons to assume both sides and all parties to this adversarial triad see their own actions as primarily defensively motivated, and as necessitated by what they interpret as the other side's unreasonable and belligerent behaviour. All three continuously justify their actions with references to self-defence. North Korea does so far more aggressively, but that is not to say the state's security concerns are any less acute.

Whether it is joint U.S.-South Korean military drills and cooperation, or North Korean weapons developments and missile launches, a similar pattern emerges. North Korea is quick to point out it feels severely threatened and must continue to bolster its military capabilities.⁶ The responses usually find themselves somewhere between enraged propaganda and missile launches but has also included the blowing up of a North-South cooperation facility and the recent staging of a tactical nuclear strike exercise against South Korea.⁷ The U.S. and South Korea – strongly supported by neighbouring states like Japan and the international community at large – condemn the North's provocations and underline their alliance commitments to one another, emphasising that the road to peace, stability and adherence to international law lies in deterrence and defence cooperation.⁸ South Korea is investing heavily in conventional weapons and defence systems to offset North Korean nuclear and missile developments.⁹ The U.S. and South Korea deepen their military cooperation and broaden the scope of military exercises. Accordingly, North Korea ups the ante of its nuclear programme, and the spiral dynamic continues.

The incompatibility of strategic interests between North Korea vis-à-vis South Korea



and the U.S. is striking. An established sense of insecurity and historical baggage have cemented perceptions in Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington of the ‘other side’ as belligerent in this long-standing conflict. The Korean War practically ended with an armistice in 1953, but technically the North and South are still at war, and South Korea and the U.S. have been close allies ever after. The relationship has steadily taken turns for the worse after Kim Jong Un gradually assumed power from 2006 until formally becoming North Korea’s supreme leader in 2010.

For South Korea, the North is an existential threat on its doorstep. It is no surprise that to be formally at war with a nuclear neighbour produces a strong sense of insecurity. Particularly when coupled with continued firing drills in its direction and statements from the North denouncing South Korea’s political leadership as traitors and a ‘puppet regime’ for the U.S., regularly promising its annihilation in conflict. Since the conservative administration of Yoon Suk Yeol replaced that of former president Moon Jae-In in 2022, South Korea has taken a harder stance towards its neighbour and relations with North Korea has deteriorated further.

The moment North Korea developed ICBMs possibly capable of hitting targets in North America, it was no longer just another regime in contempt of U.S. allies and values, but a severe, direct and growing security threat to American interests and citizens. Since Kim Jong Un assumed power, threat perceptions of North Korea both for U.S. administrations and the American public has been high.¹⁰ South Korea and the U.S. is explicitly aiming for denuclearization of the peninsula. For Pyongyang, denuclearization is unacceptable.¹¹

For Kim Jong Un, his main strategic goal is likely to preserve the regime, his own life and family legacy – in other words, stay alive and in power. The North Korean nuclear arsenal, his so-called ‘treasured sword’, is a life insurance policy. North Korean communication regularly references fear of regime change operations, contending that: ‘... without the nuclear shield, the DPRK would have ended up like Iraq long ago’.¹² By threatening to turn Seoul into a ‘sea of fire’ and sharing pictures

of himself picking American cities as strategic nuclear targets, Kim wants to deter any attempt at a regime change campaign.

The North Korean missile and nuclear programmes has been attributed to the *stability-instability paradox*; a wish by the regime to make use of its nuclear leverage for blackmail, brinkmanship and revisionist aggressions without serious repercussions.¹³ In the latest U.S. Annual Threat assessment, explanations of North Korean test activity the last few years line up with such an interpretation, stating that Kim Jong Un continues his: ‘... efforts to enhance North Korea’s nuclear and conventional capabilities targeting the United States and its allies, which will enable periodic aggressive actions to try to reshape the regional security environment in his favor’.¹⁴ There is no doubt North Korea uses the leverage of its nuclear arsenal for shorter-term purposes to push its political goals and press for sanctions relief. However, the overarching, long-term goal when reading between the lines of the often exaggerated rhetoric of North Korean propaganda, self-defence is a – if not *the* – recurring theme.¹⁵

As Kim Jong Un has consolidated power, state funds have poured into the nuclear weapons programme. His modus operandi further serves to underline his image as aggressive, unpredictable and unreasonable – not qualities in a state leader one typically associates with strategic stability and a stable balance of terror. Still, North Korea has never referred to its nuclear deterrent as part of an offensive strategy.¹⁶ Rather, its official doctrine underscores self-defence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty.¹⁷ Assuming Kim Jong Un’s behaviour is strategic, he is not risking the state economy – and with it the chance of internal instability – on the altar of continued expansion of his nuclear deterrent solely for the purpose of undertaking aggressive actions under its shield.¹⁸ One could also argue that we should have seen more instances of lower-level military aggressions from North Korea if this was the sole strategic rationale behind it. A more logical explanation is that the North Korean nuclear programme and vehement messages from the regime may in fact, at least in part, be reflections of a genuine perception of insecurity.



Asymmetry exaggerates

The significant asymmetry in military capability with its adversaries augments North Korea's sense of insecurity. As the military and technological underdog in the relationship with the U.S. and South Korea, Pyongyang is highly likely to experience severe escalation pressure in a limited war with the other two. Primarily, this is due to the security dilemma dynamics as described above *combined* with a highly asymmetric military balance.

The U.S. and South Korea have conventional military capabilities with potential to threaten the North Korean nuclear arsenal, as well as the capability to successfully launch a swift regime change operation. North Korea maintains the military capability to cause great harm to South Korea, but the nuclear option is what constitutes a threat to the very existence of the South Korean state. Despite North Korea now being able to reach the U.S. homeland with an ICBM, such a strike would never be enough to topple the American state or to win a war against it. As such, North Korea poses no existential threat to the U.S. An asymmetry would not independently constitute a source of escalation pressure, if not combined with the difficulty of distinguishing between aggression and defensive acts, and low level of mutual trust.

Warfare history of the 21st century indicates that the U.S. is able to respond quickly, with overwhelming military force, to an adversary that is no match for it conventionally. The explicit threat in the U.S. National Defense Strategy saying there is no scenario where Kim's regime survives after using nuclear weapons against the U.S. or an ally¹⁹, is a credible one. The North Korean leadership knows it does not have the military power to avoid defeat in war with the U.S. and South Korea. Furthermore, the regime is acutely aware they would by all accounts not survive it. This leaves Kim Jong Un with some difficult dilemmas both in peacetime and when planning for war.

The Kim regime also faces a dramatic asymmetry in economic terms. North Korea's gross national income (GNI) in 2022 was estimated to only 3.4 percent of South Korea's²⁰, with 1.43 and 42.9 million won respectively. As a result, the military balance between North Korea

on the one side and South Korea and top global economy U.S. on the other is overwhelmingly skewed in favour of the latter pair. While South Korea has been able to invest heavily in upgrading its conventional capabilities the last ten years, the North's military is in steady decline and can only modernize selectively.²¹

Not only has the U.S. shown itself to have the ability to conquer adversarial regimes, but it has also become evident for dictators around the world it is *willing* to do so. North Korea tested its first nuclear device in 2006. As the regimes of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya all fell to U.S. military force, concerns of a forced regime change operation grew in Pyongyang.²² In all, North Korean fear of a surprise attack would be well-founded due to the gaping asymmetry in military capability with the U.S. and South Korea, both individually and combined. The fear of regime change could also explain why U.S.-South Korea military exercises, particularly those involving live-fire and large troop mobilizations, is a catalyst of North Korean outrage.²³

In peacetime, it is unlikely but conceivable that Kim could be convinced an American-South Korean surprise attack with the goal of regime change is underway or imminent. Washington and Seoul could act defensively or design a proportional response to what they deem a provocation by North Korea, for example a military exercise. Kim Jong Un could misinterpret the exercise as covert preparations for regime decapitation. In such a scenario, the fear of quick, definitive defeat could provoke a nuclear response in desperation and hope the costs incurred will deter continuation.

Should military hostilities break out, a conflict could degrade North Korea's ability to respond below the nuclear threshold quickly. A U.S.-South Korean campaign is likely to preemptively target or inadvertently threaten North Korean critical nuclear infrastructure, including command and control, or the weapons themselves. If conventional options do not suffice, and his nuclear option is threatened, Kim would soon be presented with a use-it-or-lose-it dilemma. Similarly, if no conventional option can keep U.S. and South Korean forces at bay, nuclear use might present itself as the only viable option to stay in the conflict and hold off defeat.



A nuclear tightrope

A contributing factor to escalation pressure is the doctrines and postures of both sides, who all show a preference for offensive action. For a small state with far inferior conventional capabilities, the resort to nuclear weapons may present itself as the only option to ensure the state's future security and survival. Accordingly, North Korea appears to have adopted a nuclear posture in which nuclear weapons may be employed in a conventional conflict in an attempt to de-escalate, known as an *asymmetric escalation posture*.²⁴ In fact, the Kim regime has a declared first-use policy and regularly signals it to the outside world.²⁵

However, there are few indications North Korea has actually adopted some of the riskiest procedures associated with this doctrine, like high-alert readiness or delegation of launch authority.²⁶ Nuclear use is not Kim's preferred choice. It would constitute a huge risk for the regime, and prospects of nuclear use de-escalating a conflict with Washington and Seoul are meagre. More likely, nuclear use would convince American and South Korean decision-makers that Kim is too dangerous to be left alive, and that giving in would set a dangerous precedent that would undermine U.S. and South Korean interests in the long term.

Nevertheless, the combination of an American-South Korean reliance on counterforce developments and action on one side, and a North Korean asymmetric escalation posture on the other, creates escalation pressure for the latter. South Korea has developed conventional counterforce options that mimic those of nuclear weapons in order to counter North Korean nuclear threats. Its strategy relies on three key elements to deter North Korean aggression, namely advanced missile defence, the so-called 'Kill Chain' – which aims to neutralize North Korean nuclear weapons through strikes with conventional weapons – and Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation, where South Korea threatens to kill North Korean leaders in the event of a nuclear attack.²⁷ In total, this triad aims to deter through both punishment and denial, by making sure incoming North Korean missiles can be detected and destroyed, their infrastructure compromised, as well as posing

a credible threat to liquidate the North Korean leadership.

Pyongyang's lack of military partnerships is a challenge for North Korea, who must deter both regionally and intercontinentally – alone. Patron states like China and Russia are not allies Kim can trust to rely on in a military confrontation with South Korea and the U.S., as he cannot expect either to be willing to bear unnecessary costs of protecting him.²⁸ For China, North Korea primarily functions as a buffer zone against American military presence in the South. The instability resulting from Pyongyang's nuclear developments has over time become a headache for Beijing, who much prefers a defused status quo on the Korean peninsula. It is indicative that despite North Korea being the most heavily sanctioned state in the world, until May 2022, Russia and China have since 2006 refrained from using their veto power to stop the UNSC resolutions aimed at crippling the North Korean economy.²⁹

The geography of the Korean peninsula is likely to make the security dilemma even more acute for North Korea. First, North Korea is locked in on all sides on land and at sea, and it constitutes a very compact theatre of war. The implication for warning and response time is that any decision in or right before a war with the U.S. and South Korea would likely have to be made in haste by the North Korean leadership. Furthermore, the geography lays some heavy constraints on North Korea with respect to the basing of nuclear weapons, and per now the arsenal, and subsequently survivability and second-strike capability, is vulnerable.

North Korea also faces challenges in intelligence, surveillance, and nuclear command and control.³⁰ These are reinforced by the previously mentioned limited warning and response time. In conflict, situational understanding is expected to deteriorate quickly. In turn, the role of human cognitive biases can heighten, subsequently raising the risk of impulsive and poorly founded decision-making.³¹ For now, it seems that Kim has prioritized to avoid an unauthorized launch in favour of mitigating his 'acute time-urgent vulnerability' by delegating launch authority.³² However, the U.S. and South Korea can swiftly disrupt North Korea's awareness, and situational understanding in Pyongyang



would likely degrade very quickly if a conflict broke out. While nuclear control appears relatively secure, Kim Jong Un's uncertainty post-conflict breakout may nevertheless lead to rash nuclear choices. Poor command and control would be a source of confusion, especially if communication is severed and leadership succession is unclear.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The possibility of North Korean nuclear escalation in a contingency with the U.S. and South Korea is, all things considered, low. Kim Jong Un's main strategic imperative is to preserve his life, regime and family legacy. Only under the direst of circumstances would nuclear use present itself as furthering this goal. However, the risks of such circumstances arising are not negligible. Today, a path towards a less 'combustible' situation is unclear. There is no mutually acceptable solution between the two Koreas. The North will not give up the leverage of holding the South a nuclear hostage, and naturally the South will continue to pursue capabilities to counter it. The U.S. cannot change the fundamental problem at hand. As a result, we can expect a continued arms race and tension on the peninsula.

With an international political environment marred by wars in Europe and the Middle East, and increasing geopolitical competition bet-

ween the U.S. and China, the prospects for lowering tensions between U.S.-South Korea and North Korea are more limited than ever. There are indications the Pyongyang-Beijing relationship is warming under the Sino-American rivalry providing North Korea with more room for manoeuvre.³³ Russia's war in Ukraine leaves North Korea in a favourable situation economically, as the Kremlin seeks weapons and have few other friends to turn to. North Korea may be a risk to international security, but as more pressing matters take centre-stage, the situation the Korean peninsula could receive less attention. Kim may step up his provocations in the effort to further advance his nuclear programme, get attention, press for sanctions relief, and to make himself an attractive military partner for Moscow.

There is a certain predictability to the dynamic in the relationship between North Korea and U.S.-South Korea, which President Joe Biden summarized shortly after he entered office: North Korean missile tests are just 'business as usual'.³⁴ Overall, tensions the last decade nevertheless seem to have steadily heightened, particularly so since 2017. All the while Kim's regime is seen as a major threat and possibly an unpredictable aggressor in Seoul and Washington, and the North Korean regime sees unilateral denuclearization as tantamount to strategic knee-capping, it leaves something to be desired for strategic stability.



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