

Detering a Nuclear-Arming North Korea

Workshop Summary

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The “Deterring a Nuclear-Arming North Korea” workshop was held 25–26 October 2016 at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) and was sponsored by LLNL’s Center for Global Security Research (CGSR). This report of the proceedings is intended to summarize the panelists’ remarks and the subsequent dialogue between the panel and participants. Workshop participants came from a variety of academic, governmental, and non-governmental backgrounds; active and retired US government officials and a number of foreign experts attended to provide allied thoughts on the North Korea deterrence problem set. Panelist comments and the workshop discussion were held under the Chatham House rule.

This workshop had three primary aims: a) to contemplate a shift of focus from preventing and rolling back North Korea’s nuclear program to one of deterring North Korean nuclear-backed aggression, b) to catalogue the instruments of influence and characterize needed deterrence capabilities, and c) to identify key analytical issues for continued focus by the analytical community. The workshop sought to address these aims by organizing around a series of panels over the course of two days:

- 1) Kim Jong Un’s Grand Strategy
- 2) North Korea’s Nuclear Military Strategy
- 3) Deterrence and Assurance in a Changed and Changing Security Environment
- 4) Extended Deterrence, Escalation, and Managing Conflict
- 5) Deterring North Korean Vertical Proliferation
- 6) Towards an Integrated Strategic Approach

The workshop set before itself an ambitious agenda. Attendees did not expect answers or closure on all the posed questions but felt the research agenda was moved forward. The workshop laid groundwork for several new lines of inquiry, and fruits of this labor could help establish new policy priorities vis-à-vis the North Korea nuclear issue.

It was clear to workshop participants, for example, that deterring North Korea will require tighter coordination with regional allies. Although the character of the new trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea is still largely to be determined, some form of consultation and deeper integration will be required as the North Korean threat evolves. Enhancing the US assurance posture was also highlighted as an area for improvement; North Korean arsenal improvements raised the specter of a future decoupling of Washington’s regional alliances.

Furthermore, the workshop’s exploration of options to deter Pyongyang’s qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion of its nuclear arsenal produced few

opportunities; Kim's reliance on nuclear weapons to reinforce his regime's stability and to advance his strategic vision rules out any reasonable path to complete denuclearization. This conclusion further reinforces the importance of a robust deterrence posture against North Korea.

This report is not a verbatim transcript of the wide-ranging discussion points; it aims to capture the major themes discussed as well as provide a general overview of topics addressed. CGSR has prepared a supplemental bibliography of academic and policy articles available on the [CGSR Website](#).

Panel 1: Kim Jong Un's Grand Strategy

The first panel focused on exploring Kim Jong Un's long-term objectives for North Korea and how a more robust nuclear and missile program fits into Kim's strategic vision. According to one panelist, an understanding of Kim Jong Un's grand strategy is predicated on understanding the key ideologies that have endured since the regime's founding. The intersection of and interplay between these ideological tenets forms the basis of any grand strategy North Korea's leaders have pursued. The tenets are: a) continued independence of North Korea, b) a North Korea regime that is devoted to anti-imperialist intervention in Korea, c) a regime that is defined by its anti-Americanism, and d) a North Korea that is led by the Kim dynasty. Kim Jong Un's formulation of a grand strategy must fit and reinforce these ideologies and an understanding of his strategy should bear this in mind. Kim Jong Un, like his father and grandfather, has decided that reinforcing the dual messages that North Korea has no international master and that the Kim family is the center of the North Korea state is the best way to bolster North Korea's key ideologies. The external security environment is inherently threatening to Kim's argument that North Korea retains international agency, especially as relations with China have soured at a time of heightened tension with South Korea, the US, and Japan. Further, frequent purges and defections of high-level North Korean officials indicate that the centrality and authority of the Kim family within North Korea may be faltering. Kim Jong Un's grand strategy probably will seek to find policy actions that both preserve North Korea's agency in the international system and strengthen the centrality of the Kim regime in the lives of North Koreans. Although always a concern for autocratic rulers, Kim Jong Un's emphasis on personal survival was an important theme for several participants. The focus on policies necessary to preserve personal safety exerts an influence on North Korean grand strategy. For example, the North Korean military is one of the largest potential threats to Kim's safety and security, so he has purged several senior officials and replaced them with loyalists; this sort of action could jeopardize military readiness and effectiveness and hinder long-term strategies to strengthen the military. Kim Jong Un probably diverts some of North Korea's limited government resources to domestic elites in an attempt to buy stability and legitimize his rule. This sort of political particularism is present in nearly all political systems but presents a larger challenge in North Korea, where the political and economic pie is smaller relative to other autocratic regimes.

The personalized rule of Kim Jong Un also complicates the foreign policy aspect of grand strategy making. Kim's foreign policy to date, at least to outside observers in the West, has been characterized by declining relations with China, a possible warming of ties to Russia, and renewed tensions with Japan, South Korea, and the US. These mercurial swings are largely consistent with North Korean attempts to preserve its agency by playing powers off one another, seeking patronage, and dividing the US from its regional allies; further, Kim's moves are predicated on his perception that China prefers the status quo to any foreseeable future arrangement and that Beijing is likely to act as a check against any serious challenge to the Kim regime despite China's softening support for North Korea.

Panel 2: North Korea's Nuclear Military Strategy

North Korea's nuclear military strategy is probably in a moment of transition. One panelist used the terminology established by Vipin Narang to describe this evolution as shifting from a "catalytic posture" toward an "assured retaliatory posture." Although details of the North Korean posture are relatively scarce, there was wide agreement during this session that the broader North Korean nuclear strategy is likely increasingly reliant on adversary fears of nuclear war and escalation to deter hostile actions against North Korea.

North Korea's pursuit of new capabilities presents the analytic community with some hard evidence of where Kim and his clique want to take North Korean nuclear military strategy. The parading of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) reveals a desire to strike the US homeland. Though the ICBM has not been tested, officials in Japan, South Korea, and the US have already begun to express their concerns about the fielding of such a system. Apart from the direct impact that holding US cities at risk has for North Korea's deterrence posture, an ICBM capability also has the additional effect of potentially decoupling Washington from its regional allies, Japan and South Korea. Development of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) is another growing concern. The system, which has undergone some testing, could underscore North Korea's attempts to develop an assured retaliatory posture, severely complicating any attempts at preemptively destroying Kim's nuclear options.

Several participants highlighted the prospect that a future, robust nuclear force could number over 100 warheads, and this number was not without historical precedence. With the exception of the US and Russia, other nuclear weapon states have slowed or stopped their programs after reaching the 100+ stockpile range. Participants also noted that such a capability for North Korea would open up space for more violent and bolder North Korean provocations, especially if Kim continues to invest in conventional military modernization and training. South Korean and US forces will retain their qualitative edge, but a more capable North Korean force that relies on surprise and asymmetrical escalation could present Seoul or Washington with concerning *faits accomplis* that would result in large amounts of alliance friction.

There are still many unresolved, open questions regarding the North's nuclear military strategy. Participants speculated on future North Korean doctrinal changes that may include battlefield employment of small nuclear weapons, integration of nuclear weapons into North Korean conventional military units, command and control complications when North Korea comes under attack, or how North Korea will handle its SLBM force.

Panel 3: Deterrence and Assurance in a Changed and Changing Security Environment

Participants and panelists in this session recognized the need to tighten cooperation and coordination between the US, Japan, and Korea. In particular, international partners sought additional information on US partnerships with other regional actors and advocated for tighter ties between Japan and South Korea. Some participants pointed to post-World War II reconciliation and cooperation between France and Germany as a potential model for future Japanese and South Korean rapprochement in light of a common threat. One questioner asked whether increased emphasis on trilateral cooperation was being driven by decreased confidence in Seoul and Tokyo of US guarantees; the workshop consensus centered on the idea that deepening US bilateral ties, regardless of their depth, would eventually be insufficient and that tighter trilateralism allowed for synergistic alliance effects not achievable via strict bilateralism.

Many called for qualitatively different assurance measures from the US in the face of an evolving threat from North Korea. Discussion of a closer, NATO-like relationship between South Korea and the US was one proposed option—particularly in regards to the stationing and use of dual-capable aircraft (DCA)—as a means of increasing Washington's assurances to Seoul. Reintroducing US non-strategic nuclear weapons to South Korea was also discussed, but US options were limited because of the retirement of many of the previously stationed weapon systems. Some participants opined that if the US was not going to integrate nonstrategic nuclear weapons into the defense of South Korea, Seoul would need an independent, indigenous nuclear deterrent.

Japan, on the other hand, has no appetite for the stationing of nuclear weapons or DCA. It is unlikely that offensive strike capabilities will be fielded by Japan in the near term, but should Japan develop them there would be a promptness requirement ruling out aircraft and favoring missile technologies. Preemption of North Korea, however, is not discussed frequently enough, according to some within the Japanese government and academic circles. This line of argument highlighted the value a preemptive posture could have in strengthening the deterrence by denial strategy. If the US, South Korea, and/or Japan could deny Kim's ability to initiate a strike via preemption, then deterrence would be strengthened. This deterrence by denial posture would be more robust if the US, South Korea, and Japan integrated and bolstered regional missile defenses should preemption fail.

Some international participants expressed the view that North Korea is only deterred by demonstrations of hard capabilities. Many viewed recent South Korean press reports

regarding kill chain, Korean Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) installations, and Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation as consistent with a strategy to underline hard capabilities.

While nearly all participants agreed there was solid room for improving trilateral cooperation, near-term actionable opportunities were relatively limited. Experts often list trilateral intelligence sharing as a key first step to deeper integration (usually under the name of General Sharing of Military Information [GSOMIA]), but efforts to implement an agreement often founder for political reasons. Other discussed options included more joint training exercises and disaster relief efforts.

Panel 4: Extended Deterrence, Escalation, and Managing Conflict

The theme of uncertainty about North Korean decision making and reactions to US and allied signals continued into panel 4's discussion of escalation dynamics. For example, North Korean escalation in a future crisis could be driven by Pyongyang's fear and insecurity or by Pyongyang's overconfidence. If Kim was concerned that a crisis was unlikely to be resolved on favorable terms, he could order an escalation hoping it would drive a better outcome. On the other hand, participants also noted that an escalation could occur if Kim perceived he was prevailing in a crisis and wished to press his advantage via an escalation to receive even more favorable settlement terms.

Difficulties in forecasting North Korea's responses to crisis signaling are tied explicitly to the mercurial character of Kim. There were several questions regarding Washington's ability, in a conflict, to credibly signal that conventional military operations are not undermining North Korean regime stability. Similarly, participants believed the communication and signaling problems would become wholly untenable if a nuclear weapon was employed by either side because: a) there are no existing norms regarding what signal a nuclear detonation sends, and b) nuclear use erases all previous reciprocal demonstrations of restraint necessary to limit a conflict.

A panelist noted that the current strategy for managing escalation and crisis with North Korea was heavily dependent on deterring a crisis. As such, the focus should be more on enhancing the capacity for deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. A more robust conventional capability—especially one that can demonstrate a willingness and readiness to operate through a nuclear environment—would enhance both deterrence strategies. Several additional ideas for deterrence by punishment strategies were floated, including enhanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to enable strikes against North Korean nuclear infrastructure and the ability to quickly field new or unknown threats in a time of crisis to unnerve Pyongyang.

Panelists noted that signaling intent is critical to preventing nuclear use and that reciprocated restraint is critical to limiting conflict and preventing nuclear use. Participants noted, however, that North Korea knows the Japanese, South Korean, and US priority of preventing nuclear employment and is likely to use that sensitivity to coerce the allies. A

related discussion evolved regarding US nuclear thresholds; while most underscored their confidence that the US would respond to North Korean nuclear use against Tokyo or Seoul, several participants noted there were certain scenarios in which the US could employ a nuclear weapon that would unnerve Japanese and South Korean leaders. Similarly, several workshop attendees expressed the view that massive US retaliation did not seem a credible threat to limited North Korean use.

Panel 5: Deterring North Korean Vertical Proliferation

Panelists disagreed on whether there was any option that could deter North Korean qualitative improvements to its nuclear force or additional increases in the number of warheads. One panelist argued that the currently available policy options—like interdiction and international sanctions—hold some utility for deterring vertical proliferation, but they are insufficient to tackle the entire problem. Additional measures, like bespoke cyber operations against North Korean elites or submarine operations that offer a modicum of deniability, would probably be necessary to meet sufficiency thresholds. These new measures also offer a unique signaling channel to Pyongyang because the North Korean public almost certainly will not detect the signals, and Kim can respond without having to consider audience costs.

Another panelist argued that deterring North Korean vertical proliferation without the use of force was not possible. Negotiation and accommodation could slow vertical proliferation, but this option has been politically untenable in Washington as well as in Seoul and Tokyo. If the use of force and negotiation with North Korea are not to be considered, the argument continued, then the US, Japan, and South Korea were signaling their willingness to adapt to the new status quo.

A participant pitched a structural approach to assist in addressing the vertical proliferation problem. This framework attempted to break vertical proliferation into its constituent parts to determine what is and is not acceptable to Washington and its allies. For example, demonstration of robust command and control networks probably is an acceptable qualitative improvement; demonstration of road-mobile ICBMs poses a much more difficult vertical proliferation question to allied policymakers. By understanding the impacts to stability and deterrence posture in greater detail, alliance decisions can be sharpened. Some participants also questioned the benefit some vertical proliferation breakthroughs have in North Korea. Further, if some actions did not seem to comport with the current understanding of Kim's strategy and survival tactics, could North Korea be carrying out a missile and nuclear program at the behest of a third party?

Panel 6: Towards an Integrated Strategic Approach

Panelists agreed deterring North Korea will require a stronger integrated approach, and formulation of a common strategic objective among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington is the first step toward an integrated strategic approach. There are competing priorities, such as elimination of North Korea's capabilities, reunification with the South, and preservation of

the status quo that bedevil alliance strategies. Further complicating the matter is the issue of time horizons; Japan and South Korea most acutely feel time pressure and are losing patience with North Korea and the US regarding finding a tolerable solution. Finally, South Korean voices are increasingly calling for a more aggressive message to Beijing that the status quo is not acceptable and that China's preference to avoid reunification is not germane to discussions in Seoul regarding eventual reunification on South Korea's terms. A large impediment to tighter trilateralism is resolving the troubled history between South Korea and Japan, but several interim steps discussed in earlier sessions—like intelligence sharing and joint exercises—should be pursued while the larger hurdles are addressed. Furthermore, building interoperability experience now is important, especially because the growth in the respective South Korean and Japanese conventional military forces should be directed toward complementary postures.

The division of labor among the trilateral alliance members also became a topic for discussion regarding future integration talks. The continued improvement in the conventional balance of power between the trilateral partners and North Korea will help retire the risk of North Korean faits accomplis, but the North could still threaten nuclear escalations. Strengthening missile defense—both regionally via THAAD, PAC-3, and SM-3 deployments and strategically via Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) and regional radar systems—will help take North Korean nuclear blackmail off the table, but a more robust strike capability will further bolster allied deterrence posture. A prompt capability via ballistic missiles is the most attractive strike option and offers a ripe area for allied cooperation; Washington is prevented from deploying intermediate-range missiles by its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, but Japan or South Korea could deploy such weapons, which would be quite useful in deterring North Korean adventures.

One participant, in espousing the benefits of quiet diplomacy, posed the question of a secret letter to leadership in Beijing and Pyongyang. If the leaders of Japan, South Korea and the US could agree to privately message China and North Korea about the regional situation, what would such a letter say? Many participants offered potential inputs to the question, but no consensus emerged. After the session, participants continued to debate the query (while admiring the question's simplicity) and underscored the importance of offering a meaningful answer.