
Why North Korean Nuclear Blackmail is Unlikely

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Papers in the AsiaPacific Issues series feature topics of broad interest and significant impact relevant to current and emerging policy debates.

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ABSTRACT Nuclear-armed North Korea is now expanding and diversifying its arsenal and delivery systems, including the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. This generates fears that Pyongyang intends to use nuclear coercion to force its political agenda upon South Korea while negating the “nuclear umbrella” provided by Seoul’s ally the United States. Even the expanded nuclear arsenal, however, is unlikely to embolden Pyongyang either to demand specific concessions from Seoul during peacetime on pain of a nuclear attack, or to employ conventional military attacks more aggressively under the cover provided by North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Absent an attempt by Seoul and Washington to topple the Kim regime through invasion, nuclear threats by Pyongyang lack credibility. From Pyongyang’s standpoint, North Korea’s nuclear weapons strategy is explainable as part of an essentially self-defensive posture. The US and South Korean governments should therefore avoid policies that might unnecessarily push Pyongyang toward more aggressive actions.

Northeast Asia faced an extraordinarily dangerous period as the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis reached a crescendo. It was clear that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was developing long-range missiles that could carry the country's recently-acquired nuclear weapons, but had not yet achieved this capability. Pyongyang communicated its eagerness to nuke major US cities. Not surprisingly, the US government seriously considered a pre-emptive military strike against targets in the DPRK.¹ That period ended in 2017, when US officials said they must consider as credible the risk of North Korea hitting the US homeland with a nuclear weapon.²

The long-running crisis has now entered a new phase. North Korea is expanding its nuclear arsenal and both the quantity and types of its systems for delivering nuclear bombs. This expansion raises a question about Pyongyang's external aims. Nuclear weapons might enable Pyongyang to go on the offensive without engaging in actual warfare, leveraging its new capabilities to seek changes that might go as far as displacing the South Korean government. A particular worry highlighted by many analysts and government officials is that the North Korean government will practice nuclear coercion, often more dramatically rendered as "nuclear blackmail," against its adversaries.³

I will argue, however, that its strategic circumstances compel the North Korean government to focus on maintaining the status quo, even if it continues to ritualistically speak of its commitment to gain control over the South. The DPRK's practical policy is oriented toward the more modest and defensive goal of preventing its own absorption by South Korea. An expanded nuclear arsenal will not change this basic orientation. DPRK nuclear blackmail is possible but, fortunately, not foreordained. Pyongyang's nuclear missile development is explainable as a defensive rather than an offensive strategy. There are good reasons to believe that North Korea is unlikely to attempt nuclear coercion in peacetime and that possessing nuclear weapons will not cause Pyongyang to foment new small-scale conventional military conflicts.

Fears of Nuclear Blackmail

The prospect of the DPRK bargaining away its nuclear weapons and missile programs seems all but dead. After the collapse of talks with the USA in 2019, the DPRK government insisted it will never give up its nuclear weapons, but it appears receptive to negotiating an arms control agreement with Washington. This implies Pyongyang wants the Americans to recognize North Korea as a permanent nuclear weapons state. DPRK leader Kim Jong-un has ordered "an exponential increase of the country's nuclear arsenal."⁴ DPRK technicians conducted about a hundred missile test launches in 2022, the most in any single year. In addition to nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles that can hit the USA, North Korea is developing submarine-launched ballistic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, solid fuel rocket motors, and tactical nuclear weapons that Pyongyang says can strike anywhere in South Korea with "precision."⁵

The DPRK's State Policy on the Nuclear Forces, announced in September 2022, says the regime may pre-emptively use nuclear weapons if it believes an enemy is preparing a strike against the DPRK senior leadership, even with conventional weapons. The policy also warns the DPRK could launch nuclear weapons "automatically and immediately" in the event of an attack on the North Korean military command and control system or on Kim personally.⁶

The US think tank Heritage Foundation sees the DPRK's nuclear weapons as "formidable leverage for coercive diplomacy, to wrest concessions and benefits" from other governments.⁷ A report by the RAND Corporation opines, "Kim believes that a large ICBM force could be used to coerce the United States into terminating sanctions against the North and providing other economic benefits."⁸ Former US National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster said he fears "This regime could say [if U.S. forces] don't go off the Korean Peninsula, we're going to threaten the use of nuclear weapons, for example."⁹ Analyst Su Mi Terry writes that Kim is "positioning North Korea to be able to employ nuclear blackmail against South Korea to coerce it into political concessions, perhaps ultimately with

the aim of getting some kind of unification arrangement on North Korean terms.”¹⁰ Malcolm Davis of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute asserts that “Pyongyang could threaten to use tactical nuclear weapons to force Seoul to accept its demands, gambling that US extended nuclear deterrence would be neutralized by North Korea’s strategic nuclear forces.”¹¹

Other observers warn of a kind of indirect nuclear coercion in which a robust nuclear arsenal provides the DPRK with cover to increase its military actions against South Korea.¹²

Nuclear Coercion Scenarios

There are three general kinds of nuclear coercion Pyongyang could practice. Two apply to wartime. First, North Korea might use or threaten to use nuclear weapons to prevent its own defeat amidst an ongoing war—either verbally threatening to escalate to the nuclear level to stop an enemy from pressing an attack or to deter an enemy’s ally from intervening; or launching a single nuclear weapon as a warning that more will follow if the war continues; or striking important enemy military targets with (likely tactical) nuclear weapons to disrupt the adversary’s war effort.

In the second type of wartime nuclear coercion, Pyongyang would use its nuclear arsenal as a shield while conducting attacks with its conventional forces. The idea is that the previously unmatched US nuclear weapons capability acted as a restraint on DPRK adventurism, but a robust North Korean nuclear capability would negate the American advantage and enable more aggressive behavior below the nuclear level.

A third type of nuclear coercion might occur in peacetime and perhaps best fits the term “nuclear blackmail”: threatening South Korea with nuclear attack unless Seoul accommodates specific demands that would improve North Korea’s position at South Korea’s expense. Such demands might include the Republic of Korea (ROK) giving the DPRK economic concessions, the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea, a halt to ROK military exercises, or granting Pyongyang more political influence over the southern half of the Peninsula.

Mitigating factors apply, however, to all three possible DPRK nuclear coercion scenarios. The scenario in which a war is underway and Pyongyang threatens or uses a nuclear weapon to stave off defeat is based on a false premise. The ROK and US governments have no desire to invade or even attack North Korea absent a major violent aggression by the DPRK. Washington even refrained from striking North Korea when the incentive for doing so was at its peak: when the DPRK was close to acquiring a nuclear missile capability that could threaten the US homeland.¹³ South Koreans appear increasingly uninterested in reunification, even if it could occur peacefully. They view North Korea’s political culture as alien and recoil at the economic burden they would bear if managing the North became Seoul’s responsibility.¹⁴

The scenario in which Pyongyang brandishes its nuclear weapons to deter the USA and the ROK from responding to aggressive DPRK conventional military actions is unlikely to arise. North Korean threats to escalate from the conventional level to the nuclear level are not credible. Not only is the DPRK inferior to the United States at that level, but Kim realizes this move would almost certainly result in the immediate destruction of the regime and his own death. The only situation where a threat by Kim to use nuclear weapons is believable would be the imminent overthrow of his government by invading US/ROK forces. This does not apply, however, if DPRK forces are on the offensive and South Korea is defending. If ROK and US forces are not deterred by the shadow of the DPRK’s nuclear arsenal from responding proportionately to a limited conventional North Korean military attack, Pyongyang stands to gain little if anything from picking a fight with the South’s stronger forces. Since the sinking of the ROK Navy vessel *Cheonan* in 2010, South Korean governments have vowed to retaliate in kind against North Korean military attacks.¹⁵ This stance has not changed with the DPRK’s nuclear expansion. In September 2023, ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol reiterated, “our military will immediately retaliate against any North Korean provocation.”¹⁶

As for the third scenario, there are several reasons to doubt that Pyongyang intends to use

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nuclear coercion during peacetime to attempt to gain concessions from either Seoul or Washington.

The North Korean government has repeatedly said it wants recognition as a “responsible nuclear power.”¹⁷ This indicates concern inside Pyongyang for the DPRK’s international reputation. The Kim regime may also intend such statements to support its campaign to get Washington to officially acknowledge the DPRK as a permanent nuclear weapons state. Pyongyang therefore has an incentive to demonstrate good nuclear citizenship. The Kim regime must be aware that the international community would consider attempted nuclear coercion in peacetime to extort concessions from Seoul to be a blatantly irresponsible act.

Historically, nuclear blackmail, in the sense of threats to use nuclear weapons to force status quo-changing political concessions, does not work. The reason is that, again, such threats are not credible.¹⁸ Furthermore, outside of being in immediate danger of military conquest, the Kim regime would be taking on an extremely high level of additional risk by threatening to use nuclear weapons. Either South Korea or the United States might respond to such a threat with a pre-emptive strike against targets in North Korea. Kim’s choices at that point would be to escalate, likely leading to the destruction of the regime, or to accept a humiliating defeat. Despite its warlike bluster, the Pyongyang government has demonstrated a low appetite for risk. When US and ROK forces have stood up to DPRK provocations, the North Koreans have backed down. In 1976, North Korean soldiers killed two US Army officers who were part of a group of workers attempting, against DPRK wishes, to cut down a tree in the Demilitarized Zone. A much larger and well-armed force returned to finish the job, backed by helicopters, fighter jets and bomber aircraft circling nearby and armored, artillery and naval units on alert status. North Korean soldiers deployed but watched the tree-trimming without intervening, and DPRK paramount leader Kim Il-sung expressed “regret” over the incident. In 2015, after landmines maimed two ROK soldiers, Seoul reactivated loudspeakers on its side of the border blaring anti-Kim propaganda into North Korea. Pyongyang threatened to take unspecified military action unless the South

turned off the loudspeakers within two days. As the deadline approached, however, the DPRK called for talks, during which Pyongyang tacitly apologized for the landmine incident. In both of these examples, the North Korean government proved acceptant of tensions, but averse to actual war.

North Korea is Fundamentally on the Defensive

There are plausible rationales other than planning to use nuclear coercion that explain why Pyongyang is building a large and varied nuclear arsenal.

Under a “minimum deterrence” strategy, nuclear weapons are no more than an insurance policy to deter potential adversaries from attacking.¹⁹ A country’s nuclear arsenal can be small, no larger than is necessary to destroy a couple of a potential attacker’s major cities. For decades China followed this model, fielding less than 300 nuclear weapons prior to 2019 while the United States had around 4,000.²⁰ To the dismay of observers, Pyongyang’s expansion of its nuclear weapons capabilities appears to be purposefully speeding past a minimum deterrence posture.

What constitutes “minimum,” however, is subjective and contextual. The North Korean government has reason to set the bar for its own sense of safety relatively high, even higher than outsiders may think is necessary for mere deterrence purposes. The history of US-North Korea relations provides ample justification for the DPRK to harbor a deep sense of imminent danger from the USA. This would help explain why the North Koreans would need unusually strong military capabilities to feel safe. US aircraft extensively carpet-bombed the DPRK during the Korean War, destroying the majority of the urban area in most of the country’s cities. The tonnage of US bombs dropped on North Korea exceeded the amount US planes dropped in the entire Pacific Theater during World War II. American commanders overseeing the North Korea bombing complained during the war that they had run out of targets.²¹ The North Korean government subsequently built extensive underground facilities to hide and protect its military materiel. The

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USA has threatened to use nuclear weapons against North Korea for decades. US tactical nuclear weapons were based in South Korea from 1958 to 1991. Threats also came in the forms of statements uttered by US officials and nuclear-capable aircraft flying near North Korea's border.²² Pyongyang's official position is that North Korea got nuclear weapons because "the US has constantly blackmailed the DPRK with nukes since the last Korean War."²³ The trauma is apparently re-inflicted annually by US-ROK military exercises, to which Pyongyang reacts extremely negatively, claiming they are a rehearsal for aggression against the DPRK.

North Korea wants a credible second-strike capability, meaning North Korea's adversaries believe that even after absorbing a nuclear attack, the DPRK could retaliate with a nuclear counter-punch that would inflict unacceptable damage on the country that launched the first strike. The size and sophistication of the nuclear arsenal a particular country needs to achieve a credible second-strike capability varies depending on the military power of its likely adversaries. If its enemies lacked the ability to find and destroy its nuclear missiles before launch and were defenseless against them after they were airborne, North Korea could achieve a second-strike capability with a very small arsenal and a simple delivery system. Instead, however, the DPRK confronts not only a formidable and technologically proficient middle power in South Korea, which has strong intelligence networks and accurate conventional missiles that can reach all North Korean territory, but also the military superpower USA, which has unmatched surveillance assets, a huge inventory of missiles and nuclear warheads, and systems that in theory can shoot down inbound enemy missiles. North Korea therefore needs a relatively large and sophisticated arsenal to have confidence in its second-strike capability.

Pyongyang could use its tactical nuclear weapons for coercion, but they also could be part of a fundamentally defensive strategy, so acquiring them is not proof of an intention to attempt nuclear blackmail. Despite their large numbers, North Korea's conventional military forces are inferior to those of South Korea and hopelessly outclassed by the combined forces of the US-ROK alliance.²⁴

Even if Kim believes he has a secure second-strike capability that holds US nuclear weapons at bay, he must account for the scenario of a massive conventional attack against the DPRK. If he has only a minimal strategic nuclear retaliatory capability against his enemies, and if this is unusable in any other contingency because of the likelihood of US nuclear retaliation that would extinguish his regime, Kim might find himself trapped in a conventional war he is destined to lose. Tactical nuclear weapons offer a solution to this problem by providing Kim a massive boost to his combat power that can compensate for the relative weakness of his conventional forces. This provides a fundamentally defensive rationale for Pyongyang's tactical nukes; they close what would otherwise be a gap in a conservative deterrence strategy.

Implications for Policy

The Kim regime has a range of goals. Immediate and relatively feasible goals include maintaining the regime's position as the unchallenged political authority over the northern half of the Peninsula. Longer-term and more difficult to fulfill aspirations include sanctions relief from the United States, breaking up the US-ROK alliance, gaining political influence over South Korea, and eventually establishing Kim's regime as the government of the entire Peninsula. The regime is clearly aiming for a secure and credible second-strike capability that scares off a US nuclear attack as well as a tactical nuclear weapons capability that deters offensive US/ROK conventional military action—"repulsing hostile forces' aggression," as the 2022 DPRK statement on nuclear policy puts it.²⁵ The question is whether North Korea's weapons buildup will lead to Pyongyang pushing harder to achieve more ambitious long-term goals by using its nuclear weapons coercively against South Korea with a view toward forcing status quo-altering policy changes upon Seoul.²⁶ I assess that even with its expanding arsenal of nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated delivery systems, Pyongyang remains in a basically defensive posture, focused on keeping the Kim regime in power and preserving the DPRK's viability

Even with its expanding arsenal of nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated delivery systems, Pyongyang remains in a basically defensive posture, focused on keeping the Kim regime in power and preserving the DPRK's viability as a separate state. Kim is unlikely to attempt nuclear coercion because it would invite new risks while offering little prospect of achieving significant new gains.

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Both Seoul and Washington have responded to the DPRK's nuclear missile development with controversial tactics. The ROK government is implementing the "Kill Chain," which is designed to prevent an impending DPRK nuclear attack by destroying the missile before it lifts off. This idea has serious downsides. It presumes that the South Korean government will know when Pyongyang is planning such an attack and can quickly find and disable the missile. This will be even more difficult as the DPRK deploys mobile, solid-fueled and submarine-launched missiles. The threat of a preemptive South Korean attack could make crises more prone to escalation.²⁷

For its part, Washington has attempted to simultaneously deter North Korea and assure South Korea by routinizing the temporary deployment to the Korean Peninsula of US ships and aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons. To the extent that nuclear threats from the United States motivated Pyongyang to acquire nuclear weapons,²⁸ this policy can only be expected to reinforce Kim's commitment to enhance his own nuclear capability.

The risks and disadvantages of such policies may be tolerable if Pyongyang poses an imminent danger. They are less justifiable, however, if the likelihood of Pyongyang engaging in nuclear coercion is low rather than high. The US and ROK governments should reconsider policies that risk effectually pushing North Korea to take a more aggressive posture. For example, Seoul's discussion of building a capacity to carry out a decapitation strike against the DPRK leadership²⁹ led to Pyongyang announcing its policy of "automatically" launching nuclear retaliatory attacks.

If both North Korea and the US-ROK alliance are deterred from trying to significantly change the status quo by military force, stability on the Peninsula is robust even amidst persistent tensions. Along with the dangers, the DPRK's nuclear missile

buildup has the possible benefit of augmenting stability by making the Pyongyang government feel less vulnerable. Beyond this, Seoul and Washington might marginally reduce tensions by emphasizing defense and de-emphasizing offense in their policies and diplomacy. This might include designing and publicizing joint military exercises so that they appear as much as possible to be preparation to ward off an incursion into the South by DPRK forces rather than a rehearsal to attack the North. Inviting international observers and making public more details about the exercises might help accomplish this purpose. US and ROK officials should continue to publicly reaffirm that neither government is working to overthrow the Kim regime or to engineer the absorption of North Korea into the ROK.

At the same time, however, the allies should continue to periodically restate that any DPRK use of a nuclear weapon will result in the demise of the Kim regime. This commitment helps ensure that any offensive nuclear threat made by Pyongyang would lack credibility.

For the foreseeable future, the USA and the ROK will be locked in an arms race-like dynamic with the DPRK. North Korea is both increasing its number of nuclear bombs and developing new kinds of missiles to gain a warfighting capability in the region and a second-strike capability against the US homeland. South Korea is responding not by building its own nuclear missiles, but by trying to improve its conventional strike capability. The United States is reacting to the DPRK's buildup with a combination of hostile signaling, upgraded anti-missile defenses, and a resumption of the US hypersonic glide vehicle program. Pyongyang's efforts to augment its missile capabilities will compete with the allies' efforts to neutralize those capabilities. With offensive systems ascendant over defensive, and current US anti-missile defenses inadequate to defeat the arsenal the DPRK is building,³⁰ deterrence effectually relies heavily on the old, distasteful idea of mutual assured destruction.

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