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America confronts North Korea: A historical perspective and a look at the future

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Abstract

American policy toward the Koreas since the Armistice of 1953 has been fairly consistent: deter the North, protect the South, avoid a conflict and limit the cost of deterrence on the peninsula. So far, as of beginning of 2018, North Korea's progress on the road to nuclear statehood has not altered American actions but no one can claim predictive powers about the future.

Keywords: South Korea, North Korea, History, US deterrence, Trump policy.

Résumé

La politique américaine envers les Corées depuis l'armistice de 1953 a été assez cohérente. : dissuader le Nord, protéger le Sud, éviter un conflit et limiter le coût de la dissuasion. Pour autant en ce début d'année 2018, les progrès nord-coréens sur la route du statut d'État nucléaire n'ont pas modifié les actions américaines mais personne ne peut prédire le futur.

Mots-clés : Corée du Sud, Corée du Nord, Histoire, dissuasion américaine, politique de Trump.

Some conflicts, often the product of geographic proximity, have deep roots, anchored in regional rivalries, unsolvable (or at least yet unsolved) territorial claims, ethnic or religious hatreds that predate the Enlightenment, and/or powerful domestic constituencies which profit politically or otherwise from the tensions. These quarrels involve vital interests for both sides. One can think, for example, of the Indian-Pakistani dispute or Israeli-Palestinian relations, both of which have roots that go back well before the birth of the nation-states involved in them.

The relationship between the United States and North Korea (or Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), even though it's not very democratic, doesn't really serve its people and is a dynasty rather a republic) is not, however, an ancient struggle which, like the fighting between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, can be traced to the European Middle Ages.

The Korean war period

Since its first commercial forays into East Asia in the late 18th Century, the United States has historically demonstrated very little interest in Korea. China, Japan, the European colonial powers, Russia, and America's conquests in the region (the Philippines as well as Guam, Hawaii, and minor islands and islets in the Pacific) were the focus of American attention. As we have all read in history books, it was almost by accident that United States forces landed in southern Korea to receive the capitulation of Imperial Japanese units south of the 38th parallel (a line drawn arbitrarily by a US Army colonel without any cabinet-level officers or senior generals and admirals focusing on the question). Following the orderly surrender of the Japanese, the primary goal of the Americans was to head for the exits. Washington policy-makers had been planning for post-war Japan well before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but no one of any importance in the capital or in the headquarters of Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii and General MacArthur in Australia invested time and effort on the future of Korea. If anything, in the years after victory in the Pacific, the Chinese Civil War that ended with Mao's victory in 1949 convinced most US officials that there was nothing good to be gained from military involvement on the mainland of Asia. The United States should concentrate on the offshore islands, especially Japan, and avoid dangerous and costly entanglements on the mainland. Japan's recent history, where the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931-45) had drained vast resources of men and materiel for no useful purpose, demonstrated that land wars in Asia were to be avoided.

Thus, by the Spring of 1950, the US had practically no military left in Korea. Many analysts reproach then Secretary of State Dean Acheson for having left Korea outside of the US perimeter in the Western Pacific in a speech. But more than Acheson's words, it was the facts on the ground, which demonstrated that Korea, unlike say Berlin or Greece in Europe or Japan in Asia, wasn't a vital, or even ancillary, interest for Washington. Even the most hawkish Americans, prior to 1950, were barely aware of Korea's existence when they pushed for more aggressive measures against world communism.

If southern Korea had gradually fallen under Soviet influence after the end of the Second World War, it's possible that the United States would have tacitly acquiesced. But the thunderbolt of the North's attempted blitzkrieg on 25 June 1950 changed the equation. With the the Cold War already in full swing, the Truman Administration decided it had to fight the Reds in Korea. The possibility that it was the start of a global Stalin-led onslaught, the danger the invasion posed to

American-occupied Japan, the lessons of Munich (appeasement doesn't work), and considerations of prestige and domestic politics, all pushed the United States to lead the counter-attack. In the wake of the demise of the South Korean military, incapable of stopping the North Korean southward thrust, the United States mobilized, built up an international coalition, and saved the South from extinction.

This being said, it's important to remember than another outcome was possible. Korea was not West Berlin, where the US had already raised its flag of commitment high – and successfully – during the Berlin Airlift. Nor was this an attack on a region, such as West Germany (then still formally under US, French and British occupation) where the United States had visible vital interests highlighted by a significant military presence, deep political involvement, and economic investments. Korea was also not Japan, which were the United States was also putting in consequential military, economic, and political efforts to reshape its erstwhile enemy.

The argument that "Korea is a dagger aimed at the heart of Japan" (coined by Japanese imperialists in the Meiji Era) could easily be refuted. The Soviets and their allies had essentially no naval or amphibious capability, whereas the US Navy was by far the most powerful fleet in the world. A Soviet-controlled Korean Peninsula would have been far less of a danger to Japan than the Red Army armored divisions stationed within a few hours' drive from West Germany's major urban centers were to the Atlantic Alliance. Economically, the loss of Korea, then what is known as a "basket case" which no one expected to grow into an economic powerhouse, would have gone unnoticed (and under Moscow's tutelage and state planning it would have become a very marginal industrial economy at best). On the other hand, even destroyed west Germany and Japan were recognized for their industrial potential. Nor was US prestige on the line. The United States had never made the defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK) a symbol of its determination to lead the Free World, the way it had stood up against the communists in Greece and later airlifted supplies to protect West Berlin. Additionally, most Americans and Europeans barely knew that Korea existed (if they even knew the name of the country).

But, Harry Truman decided that the United States would make a stand. In retrospect, it was a wise decision, as the success of South Korea demonstrates.

The conduct of the Korean War was in some ways more challenging than that of World War II. Formally ratified at Casablanca in January 1943 during the Anglo-American summit conference, but in fact implicit from the start of hostilities, the United States had an easy-to-understand policy during WW2: It would end with the utter destruction of the Axis Powers and the removal of its evil leaders. There would be no half-measures comparable to the 1918 Armistice which left Germany unoccupied. In the Korean War, Washington did not aim for Total Victory against the Communists. The objective was not to fight until the Stars and Stripes flew from the towers of the Kremlin and the walls of the Forbidden City. Even a localized total success, namely the unification of all of Korea under US-sponsored ROK sovereignty, was not what the United States was fighting for. Korea was for the United States a limited war taking place within the broader context of a global Cold War whose objective was to contain, rather than rollback to the Urals, Soviet power. President Truman fired General MacArthur for not understanding that this was not World War III.

In the end, in 1953, the United States settled for what was essentially the status quo antebellum where the demarcation line was broadly were it was prior to June 1950. This infuriated the South

Korean president Syngman Rhee who longed to unify the entire peninsula. But as the head of a powerless and wrecked nation kept alive by American assistance he could refuse to put his signature on the Armistice Agreement but had no choice but to quietly go along with the American decision.

The post-1953 era

Since 1953, the US has aimed at deterring another Korean War but has not sought the elimination of the DPRK by force. American strategy has been to support the development of the ROK Armed Forces and to seek to maintain deterrence at the lowest cost possible. Washington would always have welcomed Korea unification under the aegis of a pro-US ROK, but it has never devoted resources to this end. Basically, "peace and quiet" with the minimum amount of effort has been American strategy for well over sixty years.

Obviously, North Korea's missile and nuclear development was not welcomed by the United States. It complicates military planning while it generates all sorts of anxieties and responses in Korea and Japan which the the US could do without. Since the Clinton Administration, when the North Korean nuclear threat first assumed salience (through the program had been around for decades), Washington has tried to stop, or at least slow, Pyongyang's acquisition of atomic (and now thermonuclear) explosives and delivery systems (ballistic missiles). The US has resorted to sanctions, diplomatic initiatives with other regional actors, veiled threats, negotiations, and even agreements. But, the results have been limited.

The actions of the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama Administrations demonstrate that, in the end, the United States finds a nuclear DPRK less unpleasant than launching a "preventive strike" and taking the risk of a full-scale war on the peninsula. Despite the divergent rhetoric of these three presidencies, this is the only conclusion we can draw from their actions.

Some argue that more could have been achieved if the United States had been more willing to reach an agreement, others blame too much diplomacy and not enough hard power. But the result is that though the open source literature doesn't allow us to know if North Korea has a truly functional nuclear arsenal, Pyongyang has demonstrated the ability to fire long-range ballistic missiles and test nuclear bombs. Given that nuclear-tipped ICBMs were first operationalized about sixty years ago, there is good reason to think that sooner rather than later North Korea will be able to have this capability.

The rise of a nuclear North Korea's threat and the Trump administration

Thus, in recent months, two new factors have entered the equation. The first one is the apparent success of the DPRK in acquiring soon a nuclear-tipped ICBM capable of hitting the United States. As noted, it is impossible to state if Pyongyang already has an operational capability but it seems logical to assume that it may obtain it fairly rapidly. How this impacts the US position is highly debatable. One school of thought sees this as a radical development. It now allows North Korea to threaten the United States with millions of fatalities (assuming a few strikes with megatonic-type

bombs on major metropolises). Thus, the argument runs, the United States would essentially be "frozen" and unwilling to defend its allies in South Korea and Japan for fear of incurring unacceptable levels of damage at home. This is what analysts call decoupling between the US and the allies who rely on the protective umbrella of American nuclear and conventional weapons.

The counter argument is that from the early 1960s until the demise of the Soviet Union, America faced the possibility of quasi annihilation from Soviet nuclear forces. Yet, American deterrence, anchored in a forward presence of US ground and air forces (as is the case in Korea, plus naval ones as well as aircraft in Japan) prevented the disintegration of the Atlantic Alliance and sustained deterrence. One of the arguments to support this hypothesis is that any North Korea attack would kill large numbers of US service members, and civilians if the DPRK fired nuclear missiles at Seoul, Tokyo and other large civilian targets. This would set in motion a US response to respond to these deaths (this is sometimes called the "trip wire" theory).

Since the birth of the Atomic Age in 1945, there has never been a nuclear conflict. The US Army Air Force did drop the "Little Boy" uranium device on Hiroshima and the "Fat Man" plutonium bomb on Nagasaki in August 1945. But this represented the utilisation of atomic technology in a conventional conflict. When Japan attacked the United States there were no nuclear weapons, therefore nuclear deterrence played no role. Though Japan had an atomic research project, the Japanese cabinet only heard confirmation that atomic explosives could effectively be built and delivered by aircraft after Hiroshima was hit, hence even after the bombs were operational there was no element of deterrence. They were essentially used as projectiles which happened to be more powerful in an effort to achieve a physical and psychological impact against an enemy, the same way that other methods, such as mass bombings of cities in World War II or poison gas in World War I, had been tried.

Moreover, since then, we have had very few cases of nuclear deterrence. We have the Soviet-American one, by far the largest, the Sino-American, Sino-Soviet, and now Indo-Pakistani one. We also have "one sided" deterrence, namely Israel vs. its non-nuclear adversaries, the US against non-nuclear communist foes (USSR and PRC prior to their acquiring these devices, the DPRK). The UK and France vs. the USSR are really subsets of the Soviet-American case.

Consequently, we have a lot of theory but little historical data on the workings of nuclear deterrence. Additionally, a thorough and scholarly analysis would require access to classified archives and secret documents. Thus, different highly capable researchers can draw divergent conclusions when it comes to issues of deterrence, decoupling, first strikes and related issues.

This being said, given what we know about the risks, military but also diplomatic, of a preventive attack on North Korea and the history of the United States accepting homeland vulnerability to protect its core allies, many would think that an operational North Korean ICBM would not radically alter the American posture. The US would probably strengthen moves to reassure not only South Korea but also Japan about the credibility of its umbrella, continue to invest in ballistic missile defense (another endeavor where it is most difficult to figure out its efficacy), and avoid starting a conflict unless the North struck first.

Nevertheless, there are very few precedents for this situation. The United States has so far only been vulnerable to nuclear attacks from two countries, the USSR/Russia and China. In both cases

the costs of prevention were obviously much higher than they are when it comes to North Korea. We also have to assume that only because the DPRK is much smaller, and much closer to sites on land and at sea from which the US can launch its missiles and bombers, the possibility of a successful attack are higher than they would have been against the Soviet Union and China.

Last but not least, in 2017, the United States is not the country is has been from Harry Truman – the first "nuclear president" – to Barack Obama. It is led by a man whose core message during his campaign was racist xenophobia and a mix of isolationism, protectionism, and unilateralism ("America First", a slogan used by Americans who opposed siding with the Allies prior to Pearl Harbor). Moreover, Trump presides over an Administration which worships ignorance as a virtue and openly despises the intelligence community (the "Deep State"). As the Twitter feed of the President of the United States reveals, we are dealing with a man whose psychological profile and intellect would make him unfit for even the most menial rank in the Armed Forces of his own country. As Dan Sneider of Stanford University wrote "The most troubling issue for some American policy analysts – and one which Japanese officials strictly avoid discussing for obvious reasons – is whether the President is emotionally and mentally stable. Psychiatrists have questioned whether he suffers from an extreme form of narcissistic disorder."[1]

Optimists point out that so far Trump's bark has been worse than his bite. Many aspects of American security policy have remained unchanged. The Secretary of Defense James Mattis is a highly respected member of the establishment. The president's extremism has been focused on domestic affairs (against immigrants, women's rights, environmental protection, his predecessor's health insurance system, the FBI, and in favor of tax cuts for high-income citizens). Though these policies are dreadful for those who wish United States well, so far in matters of "war and peace" the Trump Administration has not radially deviated from American norms.

Pessimists, however, note Donald Trump, not James Mattis, is the Commander-in-Chief. He appears to put more trust in Fox News (the far-right TV network) than in reports from the US Intelligence Community. Therefore, we must all be prepared for the unexpected and the irrational.

To return to North Korea, American policy since the Armistice of 1953 has been fairly consistent: deter the North, protect the South, avoid a conflict and limit the cost of deterrence on the peninsula. So far, as of January 2018, North Korea's progress on the road to nuclear statehood has not altered American actions but no one can claim predictive powers about the future. ■

Note

[1] http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/196299 "The Donald Trump That Japan Does Not Understan"" By Daniel Sneider: Lecturer in East Asian Studies at Stanford University, 6 November 2017.