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Folding Up Our Nuclear Umbrella

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There is a growing fear that North Korea's development and testing of nuclear weapons could trigger the use of nuclear weapons for the first time in seventy years.

But the catalyst to such a catastrophe may be not actions by North Korea but an ill-considered decision by the United States.

In frustration over the seeming intractability of the Korean nuclear "problem", some analysts are proposing that the US cut and run and "fold up its extended nuclear umbrella" over South Korea.

This despite the fact that our collective deterrent with our allies has kept the peace in the western pacific since the end of the Korean War.

One particular strange idea comes from Doug Bandow in an April 19, 2016 essay in the Huffington Post. Bandow has long pushed for the US to leave our South Korean allies to the tender mercies of Pyongyang.

He now fears that the DPRK might indeed use its nuclear weapons against the Republic of Korea and as a result, drag the United States into defending Seoul. That is because for the past many decades, the United States had pledged to protect South Korea by placing our nuclear umbrella over their country to dissuade any adversary such as North Korea from attacking Seoul.

Thus Bandow concludes our nuclear deterrent umbrella should be quickly "folded up" and put away.

In short, nuclear deterrence provided by the United States, having succeeded for 60 years, is now no longer valuable.

Why?

Even with the US nuclear umbrella over Seoul, Bandow thinks it may not be enough to deter Pyongyang. He has the strange idea that North Korea, with perhaps dozens of nuclear weapons, would attack South Korea and risk war with the United States, which has nearly two thousand deployed nuclear weapons in its strategic arsenal.

But Bandow, to make this idea stick, has to hold simultaneously a completely contradictory idea.

Bandow insists that if South Korea simply developed its own nuclear weapons, (and Japan as well), there would be no danger of a nuclear conflict with Pyongyang.

So a small ROK nuclear arsenal is enough to deter Pyongyang but not a much larger US nuclear arsenal!

Bandow seems oblivious to one serious consequence of South Korea diverting billions to a nuclear weapon deterrent-its own conventional deterrent will be shortchanged as a result.

What Bandow also ignores is that while the US may withdraw from the region, other nuclear armed folks might do the opposite. Would we be risking an attack by China as its leaders decided to pre-emptively forestall the development of two new nuclear armed powers on its doorstep- Japan and South Korea?

And isn't such an attack plausible as China would fear such new nuclear weaponry in ROK and Japan as seriously impeding Peking's planned hegemonic expansion in the Western Pacific and South China Sea?

Bandow has a long history of advocating that the US withdraw its *conventional* forces from the Republic of Korea, arguing-ineffectively so far-that our *non-nuclear* forces there would draw us into a war with North Korea. And he has repeated ad nauseum that our allies in South Korea were perfectly capable of defending themselves with their *conventional* forces alone so why not withdraw?

However, Bandow now argues that the Republic of Korea not only does not spend enough on its own conventional defense, although it could do so given its relative prosperity, but now must develop nuclear weapons to deter the North. Apparently ROK conventional forces alone won't do the job and having South Korea additionally short-change its conventional deterrent by diverting funding to nuclear expenditures won't matter either.

But South Korea's "new nuclear" arsenal will obviously, as we noted earlier, be substantially less than the current nuclear umbrella provided by the United States.

But strangely enough, Bandow is certain that a large US nuclear "umbrella" is not now sufficient to deter Pyongyang.

But he implies simultaneously that a far less capable and numerous South Korean nuclear arsenal would be sufficient to deter.

Does any of this make sense?

While some former leaders of the current South Korean ruling party have called for that country to develop its own independent nuclear deterrent, no one in the current government or in any of the opposition parties have done so.

But adding a multiplicity of new nuclear armed powers to the Western Pacific and Korean peninsula makes no sense for a series of reasons.

First, the North Korean government, no longer fearful of a US response to any of its aggression, might very well use its own nuclear weaponry to pre-emptively attack Seoul prior to ROK developing its own nuclear arsenal.

Second, China may also act similarly as a ROK based nuclear arsenal could very well in the minds of the Chinese politburo be a serious negative wild card in the future of the region especially one in which China's military objectives include military expansion.

Third, with the US withdrawing its nuclear umbrella from Seoul, Tokyo, Canberra and Taipei, as Bandow calls for, China would simply be emboldened to a far greater extent than it is now, leading to even more Chinese reckless and aggressive behavior.

Fourth, as we the United States withdraws, China would no longer have anything to fear from the now receding American nuclear deterrent.

In short, Bandow wants to fold up the US nuclear deterrent and in so doing possibly unleash the storm of a multi-nation nuclear conflict, undoing decades of successful deterrence and leading as a result to the possible deaths of millions on the Korean peninsula and in the region, as well as the physical destruction of two of Asia's most prosperous and free allies of the United States.