

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY®

North Korea: Friendly Proliferation May Beat A Nuclear Umbrella

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September 15, 2016

The Obama administration is debating a declaration of no first use of nuclear weapons. Some Asia specialists fear the resulting impact on North Korea. But dealing with Pyongyang is a reason for Washington to encourage its ally South Korea to go nuclear.

Washington has possessed nuclear weapons for more than 70 years. No one doubts that the U.S. would use nukes in its own defense.

However, since then Washington has extended a so-called "nuclear umbrella" over many of its non-nuclear allies. For instance, the U.S. long has threatened to use nuclear weapons in its NATO allies' defense, though the precise circumstances under which the U.S. would act were not clear. The U.S. also holds, probably, a nuclear umbrella over at least some of its Mideast allies.

Northeast Asia is the region where nuclear threats seem greatest. Japan and South Korea are thought to be snuggled beneath America's nuclear umbrella, which has discouraged both from acquiring their own weapons. Other possible claimants include Taiwan and Australia, though, again, no one quite knows what Washington would do when.

The "umbrella" obviously is defensive, that is, to protect American allies against the first use of nukes. However, Washington also could -- and, it appears, would, if necessary, whatever that might mean -- use nuclear weapons first to stop a conventional attack. While Russia and China might not be particularly friendly with America these days, they aren't likely to attack the Republic of Korea or Japan. More plausible is a North Korean invasion of the ROK.

Extended nuclear deterrence always has been risky for the U.S. It means being willing to fight a nuclear war on behalf of others, that is, Americans would risk Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles to, say, defend Berlin and Tokyo.

At least bilateral deterrence among great powers tends to be reasonably stable. Dealing with North Korea is potentially more dangerous. Kim Jong Un's judgment and stability are problematic. He might start a war inadvertently.

Yet the DPRK eventually may gain the ability to strike the U.S. by developing long-range missiles as well as nuclear weapons. The North isn't likely to attack first, but it still could lay waste to a major U.S. city.

Which would be a bad deal indeed. Yet advocates of extended deterrence are criticizing proposals for an American pledge of no first use of nuclear weapons. Writing for NK News, analyst Robert E. McCoy argued: "It is imperative that Kim Jong Un is made to understand that he faces the destructive power of our entire weapons arsenal *at all times* when it comes to threatening the U.S. or its allies."

Yet that is precisely the problem. It is one thing for Washington to use nuclear weapons, including pre-emptively, to protect America. It is quite different to do so for allies.

Alliances are a means, not an end -- that is, a mechanism to help defend the U.S. A North Korean attack on South Korea would be awful, a humanitarian tragedy. But American security would not be directly threatened. Certainly there is no threat warranting the risk of nuclear retaliation on the U.S.

Of course, those being defended have configured their security policy and force structure in response. But future policy should not be held captive to the past.

Washington's chief responsibility should be America's security. Backers of the status quo act like there is no alternative to leaving South Korea (and Japan, which faces a real, though less direct, threat from the DPRK) vulnerable to attack.

However, Seoul is well able to deter and defeat the North. The ROK possesses around 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea, as well as a vast technological lead and an

extensive international support network. Japan, which long possessed the world's second-largest economy, also could do far more.

The South is capable of developing nuclear weapons. Indeed, polls show public support for such an option today. Opposition to nuclear weapons is stronger in Japan, but an ROK weapon would put enormous pressure on Tokyo to conform.

Obviously, there are plenty of good reasons to oppose proliferation, even among friends. However, the current system is entangling Washington in the middle of other nations' potential conflicts. The result is to make America less secure.

Dealing with nuclear weapons is never easy. Washington's best alternative may be to withdraw from Northeast Asia's nuclear imbroglio. Then America's allies could engage in containment and deterrence, just as America did for them for so many years.

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