

A Nuclear-Armed South Korea?

Peter Huessy

August 31, 2016

Israeli missile expert Uzi Rubin warns us that in the past 10 months North Korea despite some missile test failures launched a second satellite aboard the giant Unha rocket, unveiled a second generation ICBM and a close-up of what is described as an implosion nuclear warhead for ballistic missiles. The North also launched a live test of an indigenous air defense missile – which looks like a twin brother of the Russian S-300, a flight test of the hitherto mysterious “Musudan” IRBM (intermediate range ballistic missile), and an underwater solid propellant SLBM (sea-launched ballistic missile) – which looks like the twin brother of the vintage Soviet liquid propellant SSN 6.

These threats have compelled the United States and South Korea, after some deliberation, to build in 2018 an additional THAAD missile defense systems in South Korea, conduct joint training exercises to better deter a possible North Korean attack and importantly, on August 17, 2016, fly all three USAF strategic bombers — the B-1B Lancer, B-2 Spirit and B-52 Stratofortress — in the first-ever USAF integrated bomber deterrent operation in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

While these cooperative actions met with strong support in both South Korea and the United States, both China and North Korea strongly condemned the planned construction of the new missile defense system and the joint military exercises.

In particular, the Chinese government said the placement of the THAAD missile batteries in South Korea’s Gyeongsangbuk Province, (home of 12 million people) at the end of 2018 is “provocative and unsettling” to the region’s security.

The North Korean foreign minister added that “the US’s never-ending nuclear blackmail” will make America “pay a terrifying price,” while the Chinese UN Ambassador called for the US to “de-escalate the situation” while implying the US had provoked the most recent North Korean missile launches.

South Korea is currently being protected by three key military elements: the US nuclear deterrent; the US and ROK joint conventional deterrent; and US Patriot and other missile defense batteries. The added THAAD defenders are simply a prudent addition to a strong deterrent that needs always to adjust to the changing threat.

Here in Washington, Doug Bandow of the CATO Institute complains that America's North Korea policy is based solely on "frantically denouncing" every North Korean "provocation." He wrote August 12, 2016 for the National Interest, that the United States should "stop whining" with "empty threats" because condemning North Korea actions had little chance of affecting North Korean behavior.

I agree that UN resolutions may irritate Pyongyang, but North Korean leader Kim Jong-un probably thinks he got the better of everyone if the only thing he has to fear is a relatively harmless UN resolution. Kim is not "deterred by words."

Bandow apparently is unaware of the multiple actions that South Korea and the United States have taken to deter North Korean aggression. And he inexplicably dismisses recent North Korean missile launches, describing them as "more of the same, barely worth a second thought" while simultaneously complaining ("whining?") that the US is deploying "missiles without apparent shame."

But then in a second essay on August 29 Bandow took a full 180 degree turn from his position just taken August 12. Apparently, so serious has the situation become on the Korean peninsula—obviously now "worth a second thought"—that the United States must remove both its military and its nuclear umbrella before we get caught in a peninsula-wide war.

Bandow has long advocated eliminating American forces in South Korea and folding up the nuclear deterrent umbrella the US holds over our western Pacific allies. But he now acknowledges South Korea would be "vulnerable to attack" from the North if the United States withdrew its conventional and nuclear deterrent from the Korean peninsula.

But to be fair, Bandow says don't worry, the South's 11th largest military, "greater GDP" and "international support" (except for the US?) enables "Seoul to deter and defeat the North" even though it's "vulnerable to attack."

Bandow sees a regional conflict that would embroil the United States unnecessarily. And thus we must quickly but artfully withdraw before such a conflict occurs without causing any future harm. Even though our exit might trigger a North invasion. To make up for danger of a US exit, Bandow says the South can build what he describes in his essay as the "Friendly Proliferation" of nuclear bombs.

The theory apparently is that North Korea is not deterred by either America's 1550 nuclear weapons or the most powerful conventional force currently deployed in the world. But, Bandow believes, the North would be deterred by a South Korea military armed with an admittedly much smaller, even minimal number of nuclear weapons and a much smaller conventional capability.

While words obviously won't "shame into repentance" the North Korean leaders, it is unclear why withdrawing US military forces from the region would. Perhaps Bandow's discovered a new military doctrine which we could call "Relative Weakness Wins."

While Bandow thinks an armed invasion by North Korea of the South is "plausible," he sees no threat from North Korea to the United States. Here Bandow asserts North Korea is only "developing long range missiles as well as nuclear weapons" that may "eventually" but not now

gain the ability to strike the United States. And in any case, any attack by the North on the United States “isn’t likely.”

Is this true? Admiral William Gortney, head of the US Northern Command, told Congress earlier this year North Korea has nuclear weapons, has long range rockets capable of hitting the US and has the capability to both miniaturize and mount a nuclear warhead on its ballistic missiles.

And the newest North Korean developments? They have twice orbited a mock satellite directly over the United States and successfully test flew a submarine-launched ballistic missile with a 1000-kilometer range just this past week.

Both reveal a capability to attack the United States from long range and from the sea, with a particular threat being a surreptitious electromagnetic nuclear strike (EMP) that would wipe out our industrialized economy by taking down our electrical grid. After all, with enough diesel fuel a North Korean submarine can get to the maritime environment adjacent to our country and certainly within the sub’s missile range of 600 miles.

It is very true that words alone will not defend America from North Korea.

But smart missile defenses, including the use of space based assets and Israeli know-how, electric grid protection and sustaining our nuclear umbrella based-alliance with South Korea are the top actions on my list to keep the peace.

But leaving South Korea to the tender mercies of a North Korean murderous regime just 17 miles from Seoul is not prudent policy or wise strategy. And hardly friendly.