



Stop Reassuring South Korea About the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella

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Washington's promise to risk a nuclear attack on the American homeland looks increasingly shaky.

With nuclear talks stalled between Washington and Pyongyang while Kim Jong-un advertises his growing arsenal to the world, doubts about America's "nuclear umbrella" over the Republic of Korea are increasing in both the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Washington's promise to risk a nuclear attack on the American homeland—which will become vastly more dangerous if the Democratic People's Republic of Korea fulfills the prediction that it will have 200 nuclear weapons by 2027—looks increasingly shaky.

What to do?

Unfortunately, the establishment response is to do what was done before, trust in the promise of extended deterrence. Assume that an American president, threatened with the loss of multiple cities and death of millions of people, would nevertheless use nuclear weapons to protect the ROK. If the United States loses Honolulu and Chicago to defend Seoul, no matter! Americans

will declare “we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship” to protect South Korea.

Don’t bet on it.

Polls that show popular U.S. support for protecting the ROK never discuss the potential cost. Until a few years ago, attacks other than terrorist on the homeland seemed far-fetched. Although a conventional fight in Korea would be costly, far worse than Afghanistan or Iraq, the impact on America would still be limited. Given the enormous U.S. advantages in firepower and resources, casualties might remain in the tens of thousands—awful, but in the range of the first Korean conflict. Most important, America’s homeland would remain unmolested, as it has in every fight since the Civil War.

However, today Kim is increasingly able to retaliate against the U.S. homeland, as well as wreak havoc in East Asia, which includes American territories (Guam, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands) and bases (Okinawa and Tokyo). Made aware that North Korea has far greater reach and could cause far greater harm—a death toll in the hundreds of thousands or millions—Americans likely would respond differently. In the abstract, defending other people sounds noble. But if mass death and destruction are the expected result, it is more accurately seen as suicidal.

Thus, U.S. policymakers are understandably growing more nervous about the viability of the nuclear umbrella. Yet, ironically, they appear to be most concerned about whether *South Koreans believe* that Washington is prepared to sacrifice millions of its own citizens. And, in fact, some ROK officials appear to doubt that Washington would act irrationally and against its own interest.

For instance, the nuclear issue has enlivened the ongoing South Korean presidential campaign. Conservative contenders Hong Joon-pyo and Yoo Song-min want “nuclear-sharing agreements” with Washington. A few years ago, leftist Assemblyman Lee Jong-geol suggested using “tactical

nuclear as the last negotiating card.” Moreover, the public favors a South Korean nuclear deterrent. In September an Asan Institute poll found popular backing to be 69 percent.

In response, some U.S. policymakers advocate tossing the American people under the bus, so to speak. For instance, last week Ivo Daalder, head of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, provided the ultimate establishment advice: “The U.S. needs to remember that this is what it’s about. It’s about reassuring the allies just as much as it is deterring the adversary.”

His “solution” presumes that extended deterrence is so much in America’s interest that U.S. officials must convince the ROK to stick with the policy. Seriously?

Consider a conventional war in which Washington intervenes. Imagine that, like in 1950, American and South Korean units force back the North’s Korean People’s Army. This time there is no Chinese *deus ex machina* to save the Kim dynasty. So, Kim uses nukes on the advancing allied units and hopes to prevent any further advance by threatening additional strikes. Or he announces that he will unleash his arsenal on South Korea and America unless they retreat south of the current border. Then what?

Or consider a time of rising tensions, ala 2017, when, it turns out, the Trump administration seriously considered starting a war on the peninsula. (Perpetual warmonger Sen. Lindsey Graham was a cheerleader, affirming that the fight would be “over there,” and thus not such a big deal.) With a military that looks like “use it or lose it” when facing preventive U.S. air strikes, Kim might decide to launch a preemptive attack while threatening nuclear strikes against America and its possessions and bases if Washington intervened.

In none of these cases is the main issue what Seoul wants or how Seoul would react. It is whether an American president, any president, should potentially sacrifice millions of his or her countrymen to fulfill a commitment that should not have been made, or at least maintained, after the North became a nuclear power. Of course, policymakers could decide to bluff, and might

luck out. On the other hand, their effort could succeed too well, leading Kim to preempt what he thought would be a nuclear response.

While Daalder emphasized having serious discussions with South Korean officials on the issue of extended deterrence, the real talk needs to be with the American people. U.S. policymakers should level with the public, note the rising costs and risks of the American commitment, and listen to people's responses. An honest and open dialogue is needed since most Americans probably don't want to commit national suicide. Yet policymakers increasingly risk triggering catastrophe for the U.S. over Korea.

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