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[Column] “Nuclear sharing” isn’t a thing

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The wiser choice would be to strengthen combined conventional deterrence while using diplomatic talks to create opportunities for denuclearization



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After its sixth nuclear test in September 2017 and the test launch of its Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) the following November, North Korea remained quiet for some time about nuclear weapons.

But on Jan. 8 of this year, North Korean leader Kim used the 8th Workers’ Party of Korea Congress as an occasion to underscore the “accomplishment of the great cause of building the national nuclear force.”

He also said that it was “necessary to develop the nuclear technology to a higher level and make nuclear weapons smaller and lighter for more tactical uses,” ordering the development of “tactical nuclear weapons to be used as various means according to the purposes of operational duty and targets of strike in modern warfare.” Additional references were also made to the possibility of preemptive nuclear strikes.

This must have come as quite a shock to those who anticipated North Korea’s nuclear doctrine would follow along the Chinese lines of “minimal nuclear deterrence.”

Tactical nuclear weapons presume applications in actual combat situations — in particular, the preemptive use of nuclear capability in a situation of conventional hostilities. This means that the weapons could be used preemptively against South Korea or Japan, rather than merely as a retaliatory threat for the sake of deterrence.

Some observers have seen Kim’s remarks about tactical nuclear weapons as a “game changer.” This has led them to suggest a range of alternatives, from independent nuclear weapons development to the redeployment of US tactical weapons or the adoption of a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement in order to restore the “balance of terror.”

We saw a representative example of this in remarks by National Assembly member Hong Joon-pyo, who insisted that “if a NATO-style nuclear sharing policy is introduced, the North Korean nuclear program will be under control, and we will be freed from being slaves to North Korea’s nuclear program.”

But there is nothing actually new about North Korea’s tactical nuclear weapon push.

Siegfried Hecker, an authority on nuclear technology, has said that North Korea passed the threshold of tactical nuclear weapon acquisition when it experimented with a highly enriched uranium weapon in its third nuclear test in February 2013. He also claims that North Korea made substantial progress with warhead miniaturization with its fifth nuclear test in September 2016.

Six months prior to that fifth test, Kim Jong-un gave directions on the nuclear weaponization effort, where he ordered the development of precision miniaturized nuclear weapons and means of transporting them.

“The right to make a preemptive nuclear strike is by no means a monopoly of the US,” he declared at the time. The remarks at this year’s WPK Congress amount to part of the process of making these developments official.

This opinion piece by PCI board member Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Hankyoreh on Monday, March 22, 2021.

A more crucial point to consider is that the US has continued upgrading its nuclear deterrent in response to the North's actions. It is a well-known fact that the US military's submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and ICBMs are capable of striking anywhere in North Korea within 20 to 25 minutes.

It has also responded to scenarios of North Korean tactical weapon use with low-yield nuclear weapons, the introduction of which was formalized with its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. These include the B61-12 bunker buster gravity bomb, the Trident II SLBM and the Tomahawk nuclear cruise missile. This means that there would be no way for the North to avoid a retaliatory strike by the US.

Even if Pyongyang were to deploy tactical nuclear warheads for combat use, the same limitations would apply. Short-range missiles like the KN-23 (Iskander-type) and multiple rocket launcher systems would be priority targets for preemptive strikes by the combined forces of South Korea and the US.

Meanwhile, the massive air superiority of the Republic of Korea Air Force renders the idea of dropping gravity bombs from combat aircraft utterly unimaginable. The only useful means would be something like nuclear land mines, but those are defensive.

For these reasons, the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula cannot be seen as a rational alternative. If anything, it would furnish the North with a priority target. Far from strengthening nuclear deterrence, it would merely amplify the risk of nuclear proliferation — releasing the “bottled scorpions,” as it were.

Many have also been talking up a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement as an alternative, but the reality is a different story.

During the Cold War, the US and NATO members in Europe shared nuclear intelligence and developed and executed joint nuclear plans based on mutual discussions. There was also a division of labor in which five countries where the US military's tactical nukes had been deployed would use their own combat aircraft to drop US gravity bombs.

But strictly speaking, these nuclear capabilities are not “shared.” The right to decide whether nuclear weapons would be used lies entirely with the US President; tactical nukes in Europe will not work unless the codes are entered in Washington.

Moreover, achieving NATO-style coordination of nuclear policies would require the US Senate to ratify a “program of cooperation” according to a 1958 amendment of the Atomic Energy Act (McMahon Act). But the chances of the Senate ratifying such a program with South Korea are effectively nil.

According to Nautilus Institute Co-Executive Director Peter Hayes, Germany and certain other European countries where the US military's tactical nuclear weapons have been deployed actually prefer an approach of establishing nuclear deterrence based on tactical nuclear weapons in the continental US or elsewhere overseas, based on declarations and the sharing of an extended deterrence doctrine of the same kind adopted by the South Korea-US and US-Japan alliances.

So the redeployment of the US military's tactical nuclear weapons or a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement would not be a desirable response to North Korea's tactical nuclear weapon activities. The wiser choice would be to strengthen combined conventional deterrence based on trust in the extended nuclear deterrence provided by the US, while using diplomatic talks to create opportunities for denuclearization.

We also need to bear in mind the ironic fact that the greater our distrust in the US' nuclear umbrella grows, the less nuclear deterrence we have against the North.

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