



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

NORTH KOREA'S TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS: MORE BAD NEWS FOR NORTHEAST ASIA

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On 5 August 2024, North Korea publicly displayed [250 new missile launchers](#), which are intended to enable North Korean military battalions to fire tactical nuclear weapons. The Hwasong-11 missile launchers add a major plank to the country's nuclear capabilities. In the July edition of the [Nuclear Notebook](#), experts from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) shed light on North Korea's nuclear modernisation project. Navigating informational lacunae by relying on open-source intelligence, the Notebook focuses on all aspects of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, including the inventory of both tactical and strategic missiles. At the outset, the Notebook highlights that the "abandonment of North Korea's no-first-use policy coincides with the country's recent efforts to develop tactical nuclear weapons." The Notebook then refers to official statements in support of tactical nuclear weapons, not least those given by North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un. These policy remarks have centred on signaling Pyongyang's willingness to not only hit targets in South Korea but also disrupt minor provocations like the US-South Korea military exercises.

The Kim regime has acted upon these pronouncements, as [evidenced](#) by the development of short-and medium-range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched cruise and ballistic missiles, and land-attack cruise missiles. This set of delivery vehicles gives North Korea more firepower at the tactical level. For example, Pyongyang has rapidly added to its inventory of solid-fuel short-range ballistic missiles. According to the [James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies](#), these missiles "have collectively been tested approximately seventy times since the beginning of 2019." This number speaks to North Korea's high resolve to strengthen its nuclear wherewithal. Also, that Pyongyang ended a self-imposed moratorium on testing on the heels of the failure of the Hanoi meeting is reflective of the costs of getting diplomacy wrong.

These successful additions should be concerning, especially because solid-fuel missiles can be launched quickly, reducing their vulnerability to preemptive strikes. Liquid-fuel missiles, which long remained the mainstay of Pyongyang's arsenal, are more susceptible given the time required to complete pre-launch fuelling. North Korea's

ongoing effort to make its nuclear weapons more usable against a range of targets is not good news for South Korea.

Sending all the wrong signals

North Korea's bid to bolster its nuclear forces at the tactical and operational levels indicates that the Kim regime does not see them as weapons of last resort only. In other words, Seoul, Tokyo, Washington, and other countries will rightly argue that Kim is committed to using nuclear weapons for compellence purposes. Fears of Kim resorting to nuclear compellence to achieve revanchist goals on the Korean Peninsula have resurfaced because North Korea has complemented its advancements with some worrisome policy enunciations. For example, earlier this year, Kim [ruled out](#) the prospect of peacefully reunifying with South Korea, ordering his military to be prepared to occupy that country. That North Korea has now renounced the idea of unification with South Korea makes the latter a justified target of all kinds of strikes, because North Korea no longer acknowledges its fraternal, historic, and nationalistic bonds with South Korea. What adds to these trepidations, however, is the strategic bonhomie between Moscow and Pyongyang. Recently, the two countries finalized a [treaty](#), committing themselves to each other's military assistance in case of an attack.

To North Korea watcher Ankit Panda, Russia will be ready to help North Korea augment its air defense capabilities, ensure the maintenance of its air force, and modernise its navy. Panda [thinks](#) that this support will "substantially complicate planning for the US-South Korea alliance." More worryingly, the prospect of North Korea getting such military succor has increased in the current geopolitical milieu, not least because Russia might deem it propitious to mount pressure on the US and its allies. However, regardless of the likelihood, Kim will be buoyed by this additional layer of espousal from another avowed enemy of the West. The alliance with Russia will make him more reckless, risk-acceptant, and aggressive. To Washington and its Northeast Asian allies, Kim's increased appetite for risk will significantly reduce the prospect of dialogue, let alone a normal relationship, with North Korea.

Fear-induced misadventure

Second, North Korea's increasing ability to use nuclear weapons at the non-strategic levels will bring South Korea's offensive military posture to the fore. This dangerous collision will endanger stability on the Peninsula, increasing the risk of nuclear use. The potential for escalation at the lower ends of the conflict spectrum is huge because of growing concerns about Pyongyang's behavior and goals. Notably, Seoul's military strategy is driven by the very apprehension that the Kim-led North Korea, shielded by nuclear deterrence, will take military actions whenever it deems advantageous. Therefore, to obviate the threats of military actions, which also include the potential use of nuclear weapons, South Korea has adopted a robust, belligerent strategy.

Known as the “[three-axis system](#),” South Korea’s strategy centres on carrying out preemptive strikes on North Korea’s nuclear and missile facilities, as well as targeting the North Korean leadership through missile attacks and special operations. As North Korea sees its nuclear weapons as a guarantor of the Kim regime, any eruption of hostilities with a committed South Korea will enhance first-use temptations in Pyongyang. North Korea simply cannot let South Korea get in a position to launch massive conventional strikes, especially against nuclear facilities and the leadership. Resultantly, thinking that such purportedly regime-ending strikes are imminent, North Korea could use its tactical nuclear weapons preemptively. As for South Korea, it could also think that launching preemptive strikes, essentially through its [Kill Chain platform](#), is necessary if North Korea brandishes and positions its tactical nuclear weapons for use during an ongoing crisis. The pressure to exercise this risky option, it must be stressed, can also increase because of misreading each other’s intentions.

The extended deterrence dilemma

Further, it is important to mention that, despite getting [recent](#) extended deterrence-related reassurances from the United States, South Korea might still decide to launch a bevy of conventional strikes on strategic targets in North Korea. This decision could be made because the [United States](#) has, so far, not committed to automatically using nuclear weapons in response to North Korea’s use of the same. This ambiguity engenders a degree of unease among South Koreans, which will only increase during a crisis. Also, Washington’s ability to make good on its extended deterrence commitments will be undermined because of Pyongyang’s ever-growing capacity to hold US cities hostage. However, if the United States signals resolve, a beleaguered Kim might face a use-it or lose-it dilemma. As every nuclear watcher knows, when such a situation arises, nuclear use becomes likelier.

These developments indicate that both Koreas will have incentives to escalate hostilities and, in the process, increase the risk of nuclear use. Such a precarious situation could have been avoided had Pyongyang not built a range of non-strategic nuclear weapons. That nuclear weapons are fast-becoming usable is reason enough to be petrified about the tenuous state of strategic stability in Northeast Asia. Given that multiple great powers have direct stakes in the region, however, maintaining strategic stability should be prioritised. That goal, however, cannot be achieved without entering into substantive arms control negotiations. The Kim regime has upped the ante whenever it has felt threatened by the Washington-Seoul strategic closeness. Therefore, rather than expend time and resources on reissuing extended deterrence reassurances to Seoul, Washington should find new ways of engaging a nuclear-armed Pyongyang in discussions on arms control. This, one must stress, is the region’s best bet as far as enhancing strategic stability is concerned.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

ABOUT APLN

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