



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

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MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS' IMPLICATIONS FOR TWO KOREAS

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The armed attacks by the United States and Israel against Iran, and Iran's subsequent armed attacks against its neighbors, have placed everyone in peril in a region already fraught with danger and conflict. The use of armed force has caused major disruptions to a global economy that can little afford more uncertainties.

The failure to reach a breakthrough in recent talks between Washington and Tehran in Islamabad, has cast doubt on whether the current cessation of hostilities can be maintained past its April 22 expiration date. While the world prays for peace, the very real threat of escalation remains.

There has been speculation that the United States is looking at placing boots on the ground in Iran. Iran is ready to unleash its seemingly endless hoard of rockets and drones against its "enemies" and has promised to "cut off the legs of any aggressor." All this posturing dramatically raises the stakes of the conflict and opens the doors to an even wider conflict. Alliances are fraying beyond West Asia, raising the specter of uncertainty when it comes to security arrangements in other regions, like the Asia-Pacific.

On the other side of Asia, a region of great potential for growth and progress, but also one of rising tensions, these events have disrupted both societies and economies. Furthermore, they threaten to further derail any effort towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Even if the war were to end, its impact on peace and security will endure and continue to reverberate as far as the peninsula.

The military strikes against Iran are likely to complicate efforts to rein in North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Consequently, any hopes for the denuclearization of the peninsula will be nearer to impossible.

The North has always believed that its existence as a nation can only be secured by its nuclear deterrence. And the events in West Asia have certainly reinforced Pyongyang's devotion to nuclear deterrence. Quite simply stated, North Korea views the situation as

follows: had Iran had developed a credible nuclear deterrence in time, it would have avoided being attacked.

The sense of validity on the part of North Korea over its long-standing decision to possess nuclear weapons creates even more dangers on the Korean Peninsula. It is likely to convince Pyongyang to devote even more of its scarce resources to develop more weapons and improve yield and delivery capabilities.

On the conventional weapons side, it is likely that North Korea is closely examining and integrating weapons and tactics used in both Ukraine and Iran to enhance its military capabilities, which in turn can intensify the threat it poses to South Korea.

An even greater nuclear and non-conventional threat from North Korea readily feeds into the desire and call of some individuals and groups in South Korea and even Japan for developing an indigenous nuclear deterrent capability. These pro-nuclear armament campaigns will likely be seen by North Korea as even more reason to strengthen its own existing nuclear deterrence.

Therefore, the situation is dire. The North has firmly rejected denuclearization talks and has passed laws authorizing preemptive strikes.

The greater irony is that the armed attacks against Iran, though intended to dismantle the country's nuclear weapons program, could propel Iran to develop or obtain a nuclear weapon at all costs, even if it means becoming more isolated than the North Korean regime. If it is unable to build enough nuclear weapons to create a credible deterrence as we ordinarily understand it, it might resort to the type of nuclear deterrence that falls within the bounds of terrorism.

The situation in West Asia creates even more impetus to work on stabilizing the Korean Peninsula and find some way to bring denuclearization closer to reality. South Korea must stay its course in its determination to peacefully resolve the issues that plague the peninsula. Its proposed three-step process of a freeze on nuclear programs, reducing nuclear arsenals and eventual complete denuclearization, though ambitious, is a step in the right direction.

The forthcoming Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT RevCon) is one opportunity to make a difference, no matter how slight. Ample attention should also be given to deliberations on its nonproliferation pillar. Reinforcing global commitment to nuclear nonproliferation could provide the opportunity for potential proliferators to take a step back, be assured of their security, prevent preemptive uses of force against perceived proliferators, reinforce the pillar on disarmament and renew the promise of the NPT.

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.

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ABOUT APLN

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