

SECURITY SPILLOVER: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF EVOLVING DETERRENCE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Regardless of the prospects of denuclearizing North Korea, the United States and South Korea (ROK) are likely to continue strengthening capabilities to deter North Korean coercive behavior. Yet, as they do this, it will become increasingly important to assess the regional implications of their actions. Their efforts have already had, and will continue to have, broad spillover effects, potentially creating new tensions with China and complicating alliance relations with Japan. All of the prospective deterrence options could fuel misperception and lead to further instability in the region.

The Current Situation

- Long-range ballistic missiles now enable North Korea to target the United States' mainland with nuclear weapons, threatening the credibility of the U.S. commitment to South Korea's defense.
- Yet defense analysts in South Korea, the United States, Japan, and China have different perceptions of North Korea's objectives, contributing to uncertainty around the prioritization and effects of potential responses.
- To guard against potential nuclear coercion, Seoul and Washington could deploy new weapons to strike targets in North Korea, build new missile defense systems, and/or station more U.S. nuclear assets in or around South Korea, among other options.
- However, as recent events demonstrate, any option is likely to elicit a regional reaction. In response to Seoul's decision to permit the United States to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, China levied informal economic penalties against South Korea in 2017 and warned against any future actions that threaten China's security.

Weighing Options

Augmenting U.S. and South Korean offensive weapon systems could flexibly support both preemptive and retaliatory strikes, but ambiguity about the purpose of such weapons could exacerbate crisis instability.

Strengthening U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, especially through stationing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula, would have broad, long-term effects in the region. And Beijing would most likely view it as part of a geostrategic strategy to contain China.

Augmenting deterrence against North Korean tactical provocations is less likely to provoke regional reactions than other offensive or defensive options.

Japan worries about U.S. disengagement from the region and favors enhancing U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation, whereas China sees such trilateral engagement as a clear threat.

Having failed to dissuade South Korea from approving the deployment of THAAD, China may exercise stronger retaliatory measures in response to future perceived geostrategic actions.

Regional track 1.5 or track 2 dialogues could reduce or mitigate long-standing regional distrust by improving the understanding of threat perceptions and other security concerns, as well as helping to recognize when and how future crises might manifest.

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