

## **The US-ROK Military Agreement and US Extended Deterrence**

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On the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2014, the Obama administration said it would send an additional 800 troops to South Korea, with the aim of preventing any likely provocation due to the deepening of worries about the stability of the North Korea regime. Worries that became acute especially after the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un executed his uncle. The US Secretary State John Kerry, in a joint press conference with his South Korean partner, also said that Washington will remain fully committed to the defense of the Republic of South Korea (ROK) through methods including extended deterrence and putting the full range of US military capabilities in place<sup>1</sup>. Last year, in March 2013, with heightened tensions in the region accruing especially as a result of the negative effects of the 2010 North Korean low level conventional assaults on South Korea, the two sides, namely Washington and Seoul, decided to sign a military agreement. This new military agreement aims to overcome the present loophole in the American extended deterrence provided to South Korea via the Mutual Defense Treaty in force since 1953 (revised in 1960) which falls short of resorting to low-level action-such as limited cross-border excursions.<sup>2</sup> Under the agreement, the Obama administration now guarantees US support for any South Korean retaliation and hence allows the Seoul regime to request any additional US military force when it deems necessary. Currently, the United States has about 28,500 troops stationed in South

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Chi-dong, “800 New American Troops to Stay in Korea for 9 Months”, *Global Posts*, 7 January 2014, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/yonhap-news-agency/140107/800-new-american-troops-stay-korea-9-months-0>, last accessed on 8 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea and US Make Plans for Defense”, *International New York Times*, 25 March 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/26/world/asia/us-and-south-korea-sign-plan-to-counter-north.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/26/world/asia/us-and-south-korea-sign-plan-to-counter-north.html?_r=0), last accessed on 1 January 2014.

Korea and has the option of bringing in reinforcements from its military bases in Japan. So, the recent declaration that came from the Pentagon stating that the US Army would deploy another 800 soldiers, armored vehicles and tanks starting next month at Camps Hovey and Stanley near the demarcation line with North

Korea should be interpreted from the viewpoint of Washington's long standing extended deterrence security commitment to the Seoul regime.<sup>3</sup>

How can we, as IR experts, evaluate this recent upgrade of the American military force in Korea with the dispatch of new conventional equipment to the Seoul government? It says a lot about the American pivot strategy which has been gradually implemented since 2011. The first aim was to up-grade Washington's general re-balancing efforts all over the Asian theatre, and secondly, it was about Washington's determination to reinforce the US extended deterrence (UED) mechanism that had been lacking for some time in terms of preventing conventional assaults on the ROK by the Pyongyang regime since 2010.

Today, the status of the UED that had been extended to Washington's allies and partners as a result of the changing geopolitical conditions is under strain. Consequently, its credibility has been questioned resulting from the Asian theatre's uncertain future. The UED in the case of Korea as well as in other theaters, has been primarily aimed at achieving four common objectives. In the first case, the "deterrence of denial" via the US existing nuclear umbrella, wherein the enemy has been persuaded not to make a nuclear assault against Washington's allies and partners (in this case, the ROK). However, if the "deterrence of denial" fails, the US has made it clear that it will be ready to punish its partners' opponents by the use of force i.e. through 'the 'deterrence of punishment''. The second aim of extending the nuclear guarantee is to assure Washington's partners that the UED is viable and credible<sup>4</sup>. Thirdly, Washington, by assuring its allies and partners in extending the UED, want to guarantee that these states will not develop their own nuclear capabilities. In this manner, the US is still looking to limit the legitimate number of nuclear weapons to no more than what has been principally accepted under the NPT formula during the 1970s. Finally, successive governments in the US, during the Cold War and after, have looked to stop a new WMD proliferation cascade emerging both regionally and globally with the help of the UED. More importantly, the UED in today's complex security conditions is expected to prevent not only the likelihood of nuclear/and WMD assaults on Washington's allies and partners but is also predicted to avert the likelihood of low level conventional assaults on them.

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<sup>3</sup> Chi-dong, "800 New American...", *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> David S. Yost, "Assurance and US Extended Deterrence in NATO", *International Affairs*, Vol.84, No.5, 2009, pp. 755-780.

The historical trajectory of the UED in order to protect Seoul goes back to the Cold War era. In 1953, the need to station American tactical nuclear weapons on ROK territory was directly related to the Eisenhower administration's application of the "New Look" strategy which was based on the containment of communism at the lowest cost<sup>5</sup>. Since then, in the aftermath of Korean War, the Seoul regime currently remains technically at war with North Korea. Until the end of the Cold War, the main concern of the ROK was guaranteeing security through American nuclear power. This concern of Seoul's about the UED originated directly from the manner it was promised. Unlike the case of a NATO member where extended deterrence was assured in the form of positive security assurance via Article 5, in the Korean case, it was extended through a bilateral mutual security pact. That is why from time to time the Seoul regime developed serious doubts about Washington's security assurances both during and post the Cold War. South Korea's continuing anxiety about the credibility of the UED first reached its zenith in the 1970s when the US administration talked about the possibility of withdrawing American troops from the Korean peninsula, and this concern led the Seoul regime to search for a clandestine way of attaining nuclear capability. But, in the 1980s when the governmental change in Seoul coincided with improved relations with Washington as well as a reinvigorated security environment, the ROK decided to discontinue its nuclear programme. This positive mood during the 1990s between Washington and Seoul created conditions convenient for the signing of a de-nuclearization accord between South Korea and North Korea aimed to free the whole Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons. In 1991, the Seoul regime in conformity with this accord accepted the withdrawal of American tactical weapons from its territory. From that point, the US, via the introduction of American off-shore capabilities, has gradually tried to reassure South Korea in terms of its overall security concerns related to extended deterrence. However, after 2003 when North Korea withdrew from the NPT becoming a nuclear power in 2006, things have radically changed. The Seoul regime naturally became quite concerned with North Korea's nuclear capacity, and particularly its improved range of missiles stocks. This became- at least in terms of rhetoric- a threat to the neighbors in its vicinity. So it is not coincidental that the ROK has since 2003 strongly emphasized the necessity of keeping a credible US nuclear deterrence as a guarantee against the possibility of a nuclear assault by Pyongyang. For this reason it has continued to rely on the UED as the guarantor of its security<sup>6</sup>.

However, after the surprise assaults by North Korea on Seoul in 2010, South Korea began to question the credibility of the UED in terms of preventing low level conventional skirmishes. Since then, the South Korean regime has legitimately started to highlight the concept of the "instability paradox" as their reality on the

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<sup>5</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisals of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew O'Neil, *Asia, the US and Extended Deterrence: Atomic Umbrellas in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, New York, 2013, pp. 1-116.

ground<sup>7</sup>. According to IR security studies explanations, new nuclear-armed powers are in general, likely to become more adventurous and risk-acceptant in a crisis on the assumption that nuclear weapons will ultimately deter the opposite side from escalating the crisis to general war. That is why in 2010 the Seoul regime assessed the level of conventional assaults perpetrated by Pyongyang regime both as a serious indication of the realization of an “instability paradox” as well as evidence of the UED becoming obsolete in preventing non-conventional assaults by North Korea. Since then, the South Korean regime has continued to emphasize the need for strengthening the UED via new American commitments which are expected to include both nuclear and non-nuclear components.

For some time, the Obama administration, in conformity with the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) 2010<sup>8</sup>, has been inclined to meet its partner’s security concerns as regards the extended deterrence through missile defense capabilities and conventional weapons such as long range precision guided weapons. This reliance on a reduced role for nuclear weapons in the American strategic approach actually complies with the premises of Obama’s 2009 Prague speech—the so-called zero nuclear policy. It was only during the mid-1990s after the denuclearization accord was signed between the two Koreas that the US came into a position of implementing off-shore balancing. This situation continued and remained in force until 26 March 2010 when the South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan* was sunk by a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine during the *Cheonan*’s patrol operation. The *Cheonan* incident revealed both the limits and vulnerability of the UED.

The reactions to Obama’s UED via lesser nuclear capabilities has naturally differed among Washington’s allies and partners, but the South Koreans were quick to express their resentment towards it, believing that these capabilities would not be enough to fulfill today’s complex extended deterrence requirements. In the aftermath of the 2010 North Korean assaults, the Seoul regime, while continuing to underline the necessity of maintaining and strengthening the nuclear component of the US as the best deterrent against Pyongyang’s threats to use all of its nuclear means, ROK officials also underlined the imminent need to reinforce the UED so that it should be able to disperse expected North Korean low level skirmishes like the ones in 2010.

The example of the North Korean crisis of 2010 has triggered the debate about the deterrence concept among eminent IR scholars. Deterrence generally refers to the ability to discourage the aggressor state on the behalf of a third party--typically an ally or a partner. During the Cold War, analysts often defined deterrence and extended deterrence largely or even strictly in nuclear terms; for example, John Lewis Gaddis described deterrence as the threat of “a nuclear-strategic response

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “*Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) April 2010*”, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>, last accessed on 2 January 2014.

in case of a nuclear attack on the territory or on the troops of allies”<sup>9</sup>. As the danger of strategic nuclear war has receded since the Soviet Union’s collapse with the eruption of both new non-traditional and old traditional threats, the definitions of deterrence and extended deterrence have been widened to include conventional military threats as well. Taking into account the political and economic considerations that shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century decision making on war and peace, it is now being asserted that it might be appropriate to view deterrence in an even broader context. Especially in today’s complex web of relations where nuclear and other WMD materials, technologies, know-how and scientists have been diffused to states and non-state actors that are prone to act irrationally. With the South Korean experience of the 2010 North Korean assault, the IR community has come to question the credibility of the UED. The general conclusion that has emerged from these debates is that US extended deterrence in today’s complex security environment falls short of stopping the skirmishes that are occurring at low levels of confrontation and thus it should be revisited and reinvigorated to align with the realities of the security requirements of our times. Taking all of these debates into account, particularly the ROK’s imminent demands relating to extended deterrence, last year the American administration decided to take extra measures in this regard and hence signed the military agreement of 2013 with the Seoul regime. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2014, US president Obama, in concurrence with the 2013 agreement, proclaimed that he would send an additional 800 troops, armored vehicles and tanks to South Korea, with the aim of preventing any likely provocation due to the deepening worries about the stability of the North Korean regime.

### **The way forward**

From now on, the current stand of the Obama administration in terms of upgrading the UED can be interpreted as both an effort to up-grade Washington’s general re-balancing efforts all over the Asia-Pacific theatre, as well as its determination to reinforce the UED mechanism that since 2010 has been unable to prevent conventional assaults on the ROK by the Pyongyang regime. Of course, one should not forget that the American administration, in closing the loophole present in South Korean’s extended deterrence via additional conventional American manpower support (while still refraining from introducing on-shore nuclear deterrence on the Korean peninsula), is aiming to achieve two objectives. First and foremost, reinforcing the US re-balancing strategy without triggering an overt arms race in the Asia-Pacific with China, and secondly, Washington’s desire to keep non-proliferation efforts viable in this part of the world by maintaining the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Surely, this new stance of sending additional support to the ROK in terms of conventional capabilities will be read carefully, not just by the partner countries of the Asia-Pacific but beyond, where US allies and partners in different geographical areas have also recently developed similar concerns about the UED.

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<sup>9</sup> Gaddis, “Strategies of Containment...”, *ibid.*