



The Case for Deterrence

March 19, 2018

The United States can deter North Korean aggression—as it has for decades—by strengthening alliances and bolstering allied military posture in Asia.

Why is deterrence effective?

Faced with dangerous North Korean nuclear capabilities, deterrence remains an effective strategy for addressing the threat posed by North Korea.

- **Deterrence works:** The United States and its allies have effectively deterred North Korea for decades, and robust U.S. diplomatic and military efforts can continue to deter North Korean aggression. As long as the United States maintains a robust military presence in the region, and its extended deterrence commitments remain rock solid, North Korea will remain deterred regardless of its intercontinental ballistic missile capability. Kim Jong-un wants to stay in power, and he knows that if he starts a conflict the United States and its allies would wipe out his regime.¹

Recommendations to deter North Korean aggression

The threat from North Korea is evolving, and there is much work to be done to bolster deterrence.² Together with U.S. allies, the Trump administration should take the following steps:

- **Be a reliable ally:** The strength of U.S. alliances cannot be measured by the number of U.S. troops deployed or joint military exercises conducted. At its core, alliance strength is measured by shared values, trust, and coordination between the governments. The United States should conduct regular, high-level trilateral meetings between the United States, Japan, and South Korea to coordinate their positions on North Korea.
- **Strengthen regional ballistic missile defense and homeland defense:** The United States should consider whether an additional Terminal High Altitude Area Defense unit is necessary to protect the Korean Peninsula as well as what additional regional ballistic missile defense capabilities are needed to support Japan and Guam. The Trump administration should strengthen U.S. homeland defense, including by potentially increasing the number of Ground-Based Interceptors.
- **Address Seoul's vulnerability to North Korean rocket and artillery attacks:** The United States and South Korea should develop an action plan to safeguard Seoul from rocket and artillery attacks. The two nations should also take joint cooperative steps to improve chemical and bioweapon preparedness and response for possible North Korean attacks using conventional, chemical, biological, and cyber capabilities.

- **Operationalize trilateral defense cooperation:** The United States could start by regularizing reciprocal exchanges of South Korean and Japanese military personnel in bilateral military exercises. The three countries should sign a trilateral General Security of Information Agreement so that classified operational information could be more easily shared, making trilateral cooperation more operationally effective.
- **Strengthen extended deterrence:** As North Korea increases its capabilities, the possibility of nuclear coercion will increase.³ The United States therefore needs to work closely with South Korea and Japan to strengthen perceptions of America's extended deterrence commitments to defend its allies against attacks. The United States must elevate its extended deterrence dialogues; invest genuine diplomatic capital in trilateral defense and intelligence cooperation; and ensure that its extended deterrence and nuclear declaratory policies are crystal clear.⁴

Endnotes

1 John Haltiwanger, "USA vs. North Korea: If there is war, who has the stronger military and most nuclear weapons?", *Newsweek*, November 30, 2017, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/usa-north-korea-war-stronger-military-most-nuclear-weapons-727682>.

2 BBC News, "What we know about North Korea's missile programme," August 10, 2017, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17399847>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S. Security Treaty," available at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html> (last accessed March 2018); The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953," available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp (last accessed March 2018).