



Strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula: dual crisis and risk reduction measures

Policy brief

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The Asia-Pacific Strategic Risks project convenes government officials, experts, and practitioners from South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the UK to discuss how changing threat perceptions impact new and ongoing proliferation challenges and what policy solutions can address them, including steps to encourage strategic restraint, greater collaboration and carefully honed nuclear risk reduction diplomacy. This is a joint project between the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and the European Leadership Network. The opinions articulated in the report represent the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or the European Leadership Network, or any of their members.

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Executive summary

North and South Korea are locked in a competitive cycle marked by efforts to balance each other's increasing military capabilities.

North Korea's nuclear strategy appears to be departing from traditional deterrence principles, indicating a shift towards potential pre-emptive use of its nuclear capabilities. While North Korea had initially focused on building a robust ICBM force to deter the United States, its strategy has evolved beyond traditional deterrence. There's also the notion that North Korea may aim to create a 'nuclear shadow' over its conventional forces to discourage comprehensive US military intervention. Consequently, North and South Korea are locked in a competitive cycle marked by efforts to balance each other's increasing military capabilities.

This report addresses several critical questions arising from these developments. It is divided into two parts, with the first focusing on arms control stability on the Korean Peninsula, analysing North Korea's nuclear posture and its implications. The second part explores crisis stability, considering the impact of simultaneous crises in Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula on North Korea's strategic calculations.

The report offers policy recommendations for South Korean policymakers to address these challenges effectively:

- **Resume inter-Korean dialogue** to build trust and establish operational hotlines for preventing inadvertent confrontations;
- **Initiate crisis management dialogues with China** through academic forums and government-level discussions to minimise unwarranted responses and deter crisis escalation;
- **Create a regional dialogue for security cooperation**, focusing on confidence-building measures to address grey-zone conflicts, proactive preparation for potential Taiwan-related crises, and collaboration with friendly nations for effective crisis management;
- **Develop flexible response measures** that avoid threatening adversaries' survival and promote adaptable plans for near-nuclear crises;
- **Explore comprehensive arms control measures** that bridge North Korea's security concerns and encourage negotiations on corresponding measures to improve regional stability.

Introduction

A more thorough examination is needed of how North Korea's rhetoric, the US's extended deterrence commitments, and the US's strategic asset deployments interact.

Recent studies on North Korea's nuclear strategy indicate that the country might employ its nuclear capabilities pre-emptively, rather than solely for traditional deterrence.¹ Previously, the development of a large-scale Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force, capable of causing massive casualties in the United States, was viewed as a means to leverage the threat of nuclear weapons against the United States. However, North Korea's nuclear strategy appears to extend beyond merely enhancing its deterrent capabilities. As North Korea's nuclear arsenal grows, concerns rise about the diverse potential uses of these weapons. This view challenges the notion of a 'no first use' policy in the North Korean context and heightens concerns over a potential North Korean nuclear strike against the United States or its allies, particularly in light of North Korea's revised nuclear doctrine, which broadens the circumstances for nuclear weapons use.

Consequently, several studies have examined the relationship between the evolution of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and its strategic objectives.² One perspective suggests that North Korea views its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against US military actions and a tool to hinder US troop deployments in South Korea and Japan.³ Recent academic work also emphasises the operational utility of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, especially considering the potential miniaturisation of warheads and diversification of delivery means.⁴

It has also been proposed that North Korea might use nuclear threats to create a 'nuclear shadow' over its conventional forces, demonstrating a strike capability against the US mainland to deter comprehensive US military intervention and minimise its losses in conventional attacks against South Korea.⁵ Another view is that North Korea could utilise a significant portion of its ICBM capabilities to undermine US extended deterrence, thereby preventing US retaliation against a limited North Korean nuclear attack. This raises fears that North Korea could deploy its nuclear weapons almost immediately upon the onset of conflict, given the limited time window available to use these weapons effectively.⁶

In response to North Korea's nuclear threats, South Korea and the US are developing various countermeasures. However, these efforts are intensifying North Korea's perception of threat and deepening the security dilemma. This escalation of regional instability is prompting North Korea to adjust its military posture. The existing discussions often overlook the complex dynamics involving North Korea, South Korea, and the US that shape North Korea's evolving nuclear posture. Therefore, a more thorough examination is needed of how North Korea's rhetoric, the US's extended deterrence commitments, and the US's strategic asset deployments interact. Against this backdrop, the following questions need to be probed:

First, what are the main concerns arising from these changes? Secondly, how is the increasing nuclear threat from North Korea shaping South Korean discussions on risk reduction in the region? Thirdly, what can South Korea expect from North Korea's military strategies if simultaneous crises occur on the Korean Peninsula and in Taiwan? Additionally, what is the current status of South Korean deliberations regarding strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in terms of crisis management and arms reduction? This report also identifies shortcomings in current approaches and suggests further actions to tackle these challenges.

The report is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on arms control stability on the Korean Peninsula. It includes an assessment of North Korea's nuclear posture and its impact on its military strategy. This section will delve into the changing nature of North Korea's nuclear doctrine and the consequences of the action-reaction dynamic that fuels an arms race and undermines stability on the Korean Peninsula. The second part addresses crisis stability, exploring how a dual-crisis scenario – simultaneous crises in Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula – would alter North Korea's strategic calculations. Finally, the report proposes policy recommendations for effective risk reduction and management.

Assessment of the past and present

The concept of arms race stability emphasises the importance of setting clear limits on the buildup of arms to ensure that neither party seeks disruptive advantages. In 2021, North Korea revealed a five-year military modernisation plan during its Eighth Party Congress, and in 2022, it introduced a new nuclear law. These developments have raised concerns about North Korea's changing nuclear posture. The stability of the Korean Peninsula is deteriorating, with North Korea using its nuclear and conventional arsenal for deterrence, and South Korea adjusting its capabilities in response to the evolving situation. However, this interaction has led to an arms race, exacerbating the security dilemma.

Evolving nuclear posture and the allied response

North Korea's revised policy indicates subtle shifts in its stance on the use of nuclear weapons (Table 1). The Supreme People's Assembly unanimously passed a new law that updates North Korea's nuclear doctrine, detailing the scenarios under which it might employ nuclear weapons.⁷ Since this announcement, various analyses of North Korea's nuclear posture have emerged, yet there is no consensus.

While maintaining that deterrence is the primary function of its nuclear arsenal, North Korea has moved away from the position that nuclear weapons would only be used in response to nuclear attacks by adversaries. The policy now allows for the possibility of pre-emptive nuclear strikes, not just against Nuclear Weapon States but also against their allies. This approach stands in stark contrast to international efforts to persuade Nuclear Weapon States to commit to a 'no first use' pledge and to provide negative security assurances to non-nuclear Weapon States.

Furthermore, North Korea has deliberately kept the conditions for nuclear use ambiguous, broadening the scope for various interpretations of pre-emptive use. It expanded the criteria for using nuclear weapons to include not only the enemy's nuclear attacks but also imminent non-nuclear or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) attacks on North Korea. North Korea has also emphasised the operational need to prevent the escalation and prolongation of war and to act in anticipation of catastrophic damage to its population.

Significantly, North Korea has placed greater focus on the role of tactical nuclear weapons. By implying that it has a tactical-level operational plan, North Korea has clarified its intentions to develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons. Previously, the command and control (C2) structure for these weapons was unclear, but now North Korea has developed C2 capabilities and a predetermined operational plan for nuclear weapons use. Although without specifying detailed conditions, North Korea warned that a nuclear strike could be automatically and immediately executed according to this predetermined plan if the nuclear command and control system is threatened by an enemy attack. Additionally, its special forces have started training exercises that indicate a potential expansion of their role in nuclear operations.⁸

Table 1. Change of North Korea's nuclear doctrine

	2013	2022
Command and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exclusive authority of the Commander in Chief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exclusive authority of the Chair of NDC (National Defense Commission)
Sole purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deterrence and retaliation against nuclear attacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear use when nuclear/WMD attacks are imminent
Target	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear states and their allies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear states and their allies
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional Nuclear Test Plans Opposition to the nuclear arms race Support of nuclear disarmament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability of nuclear weapons states Nuclear weapon life cycle management

To develop a more flexible and targeted strategy for nuclear weapon usage, North Korea has advanced in diversifying the delivery means of its nuclear arsenal. North Korea has announced regular updates to its nuclear weapons strategy under varying circumstances to ensure the dependable fulfilment of its mission by nuclear forces.

North Korea's five-year military modernisation plan, unveiled in January 2021, sheds light on specific development projects (see Table 2). In 2021 and 2022, hypersonic weapons were test-fired, with the third launch being referred to as the 'final test'. A new submarine-launched ballistic missile has also been revealed, though its operational effectiveness is still subject to debate. In April 2023, North Korea tested 'Hae-il', an underwater drone, which holds significant military value for anti-access strategies. November 2023 witnessed the successful launch of a military reconnaissance satellite, following two failed attempts. North Korea also displayed a mock-up of a new tactical nuclear warhead.⁹ These developments, along with the diversification of missile tests, including launches from railroad tracks and an underground silo, highlight the evident broadening of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and its potential applications.

Table 2. North Korea's military modernisation plan

Weapons system	Date	Notes
Hypersonic weapons	September 2021, January 2022	At the end of its research phase, test-launched three times
Nuclear submarine	September 2021 (revealed)	Nuclear use when nuclear/WMD attacks are imminent
Underwater vehicle	January 2022 (revealed)	More than 50 final rounds of testing

Military satellite	November 2023 (successful launch)	Two failed attempts
Tactical nuclear weapon		Launched from a train on railroad tracks and underwater silo
Solid-fuel missile propulsion	April 2023 (revealed)	More than 50 final rounds of testing

In response to North Korea's nuclear capabilities, the United States and South Korea have focused on bolstering their capabilities to counterbalance North Korea's nuclear forces. A key component of South Korea's strategy is the 'Three-Axis' system; this includes a kill chain for pre-emptive strikes against the origin of an attack, the 'Korea Air and Missile Defence' system for intercepting incoming missiles at the terminal phase, and the 'Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation' system aimed at neutralising the adversary's C2 by targeting its leadership in the event of an attack.¹⁰ This third component, which was originally conceptualised following North Korea's fifth nuclear test in 2016, was revitalised and reintegrated into South Korea's response system. The use of special operations forces and precision-strike capabilities to incapacitate the North Korean leadership, as indicated by this operational concept, increases the likelihood of provoking Pyongyang to deploy nuclear weapons during times of crisis.

Given North Korea's inclination to use the threat of using nuclear weapons to its advantage, it becomes crucial to deter such actions through force buildups that ensure escalation dominance. Following the logic that stability arises from capability asymmetry, South Korea has sought to develop defences capable of countering the North Korean nuclear threat and minimising damage to allied forces. Based on the belief that deterrence is achieved through mutual fear, South Korea considers deterrence by punishment an effective way to signal to North Korea that any nuclear or conventional provocation could threaten the survival of its regime.

In April 2022, South Korea's Defence Acquisition Program Administration announced the 'Defence Technology Plan', outlining strategies to secure and develop core technologies for future advanced weapon systems.¹¹ Investments in the Three-Axis system include the development of indigenously built medium-range and long-range surface-to-air missile systems, as well as ground-, sea-, and air-launched variants of the Haesong- and Hyunmoo-series. This also encompasses shorter-range anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems, along with longer-range land-attack cruise missiles. South Korea has tested a sea-based Hyunmoo-variant, becoming the first non-nuclear weapon state to develop submarine-launched ballistic missiles.¹² In addition to creating powerful, high-precision cruise and ballistic missiles, South Korea aims to enhance its armoured mechanised warfare capabilities for high-speed manoeuvre warfare.

Implications for arms control stability

There is a distinct pattern of interaction between North and South Korea, characterised by competition and balancing responses. Both have actively tried to counterbalance the other's increasing military

capabilities. Notably, North Korea has significantly advanced its nuclear weapons and missile development programs, particularly in 2016/17 and 2021/22. South Korea's missile development programs have also made big strides during this time.¹³ Subsequent security enhancements by the United States and South Korea are likely to involve the missile defences of the allies and force North Korea to adjust its nuclear posture to avoid a 'use or lose' scenario. This, in turn, will drive the allies to develop additional countermeasures to achieve net deterrence objectives.¹⁴ As the two Koreas continue their military modernisation in a naturally competitive environment, seeking asymmetric capabilities for strategic advantage, they are unlikely to engage in mutual restraint or arms control measures.

In the absence of de-escalation strategies, the allies have strengthened their efforts to increase the credibility of extended deterrence. Following the US-South Korea summit in Washington, the allies emphasised the full range of military capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, missile defence, and advanced non-nuclear capabilities.¹⁵ They committed to enhancing the regular visibility of strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula and to strengthening combined exercises and training activities for nuclear deterrence application through the new Nuclear Consultation Group, a bilateral mechanism designed for joint planning in nuclear contingencies. After the US-South Korea-Japan summit at Camp David in August, the US reaffirmed its extended deterrence commitments to both Japan and South Korea and announced more regular multi-domain trilateral exercises to enhance coordinated capabilities and deepen cooperation.¹⁶ In particular, the allies emphasised the importance of real-time sharing of missile warning data to deter and respond to North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile threats more effectively.

Although these measures are deemed necessary to reassure allies, they also carry a high risk of exacerbating security dilemmas. The Declaration notably omits terms like 'sharing', which refers to a NATO-style deterrence mechanism in South Korea, or 'planning', similar to the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, leaving the level and scope of US commitment to its discretion. This clarification aims to prevent the misconception that South Korea is automatically involved in the US's nuclear decision-making process.¹⁷ However, North Korea has sought strategic alliances with China and Russia to counter the US alliance system. This regional coalition, distinct from the US alliance system in Asia, complicates the prospects for the two Koreas to mitigate the risks of the security spiral and potential conflict escalation through meaningful dialogue.

As the two Koreas continue their military modernisation in a naturally competitive environment, seeking asymmetric capabilities for strategic advantage, they are unlikely to engage in mutual restraint or arms control measures.

Exploring future scenarios

Crisis stability is concerned with reducing escalatory pressures in conflicts to prevent unintended escalation due to miscalculations and misunderstandings. It refers to a state where parties in a confrontation lack incentives for pre-emption or escalation. The possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea raises significant concerns about their potential use, underscoring the importance of determining whether North Korea might be incentivised to use force during a crisis, as some previous studies have suggested. However, assessing crisis stability involves more than just the buildup of nuclear forces. This section examines the strategic logic behind North Korea's limited nuclear use strategy, emphasising the prerequisites and challenges it encounters.

Dual crisis scenarios and North Korea's strategic calculation

Regarding dual crisis scenarios and North Korea's strategic calculations, earlier studies have suggested that North Korea could benefit from conducting a rapid surprise attack for a limited objective or operational gain. North Korea's strategy requires at least three key prerequisites. First, it requires the development of low-yield nuclear weapons with precise guidance systems to control collateral damage and manage conflict escalation. Second, a successful pre-emptive strike relies on the assumption that the US response would be measured, necessitating accurate assessments of US capabilities and intentions. Third, North Korea must perceive a significant threat to its core interests from the US or South Korea, such as a perceived attempt at regime change or a crisis endangering its citizens.

Executing a limited nuclear use strategy poses considerable challenges for North Korea. The confined battlefield of the Korean Peninsula makes it difficult to contain damage and prevent escalation to full-scale war. Moreover, any North Korean nuclear use, regardless of scale, would likely be seen by the United States as a challenge to global order, prompting severe retaliation. Additionally, North Korea's strategy is predicated on assumptions about US and South Korean offensive operations, but the allied forces are mainly defensive in posture. Thus, the likelihood of a US action posing a substantial threat to North Korean regime's survival at a crisis outset is low. However, in a crisis, North Korea might employ coercive signalling, including threats and military posture changes, to exploit surprise and achieve early decisive effects.

As China increases its military focus on Taiwan and the United States strengthens its regional military presence, allies like South Korea and Japan have turned their attention to potential conflicts in Asia and the strategic flexibility of US forces. In a US Congressional hearing in March 2023, questions were raised about South Korea's willingness to allow US force deployment from the peninsula during a Taiwan crisis. Adding to this, Robert Abrams, former commander of the US Forces Korea (USFK), commented in late 2021 on the need for operational plans to address challenges from China.¹⁸ South Korea, recognising that a crisis in Taiwan could escalate into a broader crisis in the Korean Peninsula, is cautious of becoming entrapped.¹⁹ The South Korean Ministry of National Defence has stated that South Korea is not legally bound to assist Taiwan during a crisis and has not engaged in any discussions or formulated any plans to support Taiwan under such circumstances.²⁰ The US-ROK

summit only officially discussed Taiwan in 2021, with Presidents Biden and Moon emphasising the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, a sentiment reiterated in a subsequent meeting between President Biden and President Yoon, underscoring its importance for Indo-Pacific security and prosperity.²¹

South Korea's cautious approach to the Taiwan crisis and its emphasis on a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues stems from concerns that turmoil in Taiwan could trigger a domino effect. Being a close ally of the United States, South Korea might struggle to remain neutral if the US becomes involved in a conflict over Taiwan.²² This situation could potentially escalate into armed conflict in the East China Sea and provoke aggressive actions from North Korea, leading to a full-scale crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

There is also a risk that North Korea could exploit a crisis in Asia to test US resolve in a dual crisis, increase its strategic value to China by restraining South Korea's Armed Forces from participating in regional conflicts, and seek opportunities to alter the status quo. The conditions under which North Korea would actively seek such strategic opportunities require careful analysis.

The United States, while committed to defending Taiwan for regional stability, is unlikely to push China to the point of unavoidable military confrontation. Beijing is expected to remain cautious about the significant and lasting costs of an armed conflict. Currently, there seems to be no compelling reason for either party to try to change the existing status quo. However, the academic community has been actively discussing the Taiwan issue.²³ South Korean experts largely believe that the United States, China, and Taiwan lack substantial motivation to escalate tensions into a full-scale military conflict, given the unpredictability of outcomes and potential losses. However, China's increasingly assertive stance on reunification, and the fact that a limited military conflict cannot be completely ruled out, is causing anxiety among South Korean scholars.²⁴

Many South Korean scholars view China's approach to the Taiwan issue as a complex mix of diplomatic finesse, internal political considerations, and international posturing. China is in a delicate position that requires shrewd diplomatic manoeuvring and careful balancing of internal and external factors. It may apply diplomatic pressure on pro-independence factions in Taiwan while sending a strong warning to the Democratic Progressive Party Government and its staunch supporter, the United States. Internally, China faces the critical challenge of maintaining political stability and unity under Xi Jinping. To achieve this, gaining public support is essential, and affirming a strong commitment to the 'One China' principle is crucial.

The evolving nuclear posture in Northeast Asia encompasses three primary scenarios.²⁵ The first scenario contemplates a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan's offshore islands. This situation would force Taiwan to decide between actively resisting and risking a prolonged conflict or seeking de-escalation to minimise casualties. The People's Liberation Army could respond with limited missile strikes, artillery bombardments, and even attempts to occupy Taiwanese cities. While China's goal would be to limit the economic and diplomatic fallout of the conflict, there remains a risk of it escalating into a protracted regional conflict. Demonstrating

overwhelming force might not guarantee Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Another strategy might be a blockade to exert influence over Taiwan by restricting vessel movement, causing economic harm, and retaining the ability to reverse or adapt actions. This approach, however, has its own escalation risks, as the United States and its allies might respond with naval buildup and economic sanctions.

In a scenario involving a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, China would require dominance in maritime and aerial domains, and substantial logistical support, and would encounter challenges in overcoming Taiwan's coastal defences and urban areas.²⁶ Taiwan would mobilise its forces, and involvement by the United States and its allies could render the conflict highly costly for all parties.

China's strategies towards Taiwan range in intensity. Low-intensity tactics involve shows of force aimed at influencing without full-scale military operations. Medium-intensity approaches display confidence in achieving objectives with existing forces. The high-intensity scenario contemplates a full-scale invasion, considering the uncertainties of military capabilities. The involvement of South Korea and the strategic calculations of North Korea vary depending on these scenarios.

Amid geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, the United States has emphasised its strategic flexibility to address security threats beyond the Korean Peninsula, especially in the Taiwan Strait.²⁷ In a crisis, South Korea is likely to work with the United States to determine the level and form of support needed. The degree of engagement by the USFK and the South Korean armed forces in a Taiwan Strait crisis would depend on the conflict's specific nature. Traditionally equipped as ground forces to deter North Korean aggression, logistical challenges, including the geographical distance between South Korea and Taiwan, would limit rapid deployment and immediate involvement of the combined forces on the Korean Peninsula. In a Taiwan Strait crisis, US forces stationed in Japan, utilising naval, marine, and air assets, would likely be the first to mobilise. If the USFK supports Taiwan, the 7th Air Force's reconnaissance capabilities might be initially deployed, with potential involvement of the US Army's 2nd Division in a larger conflict involving China and Taiwan. South Korea could provide logistical support, vessel escort, aid, and participation in coalition operations, adjusting its involvement level as the situation escalates, while avoiding direct military engagement.

Crisis stability may be compromised if North Korea takes pre-emptive action due to misinterpreting allied forces' intentions in the South or by opportunistically aligning with China to disrupt the regional status quo. Studies suggest that North Korea, if it sees a chance to advance its objectives, might employ psychological warfare, hybrid tactics, and even consider direct nuclear weapon use if backed by China.²⁸ North Korea exercises restraint, including with its nuclear capabilities, when it perceives a clear US response, non-provocative actions by the US-ROK alliance, and limited gains. However, a Northeast Asia crisis could alter this dynamic. Seventy years of standoff on the Korean Peninsula have conditioned North and South Korea to prepare for worst-case scenarios, increasing the risk of North Korea misinterpreting the alliance's military responses during a Taiwan crisis as a direct threat. North Korea would react to visible military movements in and around the Korean

Peninsula, raising the likelihood of a miscalculated confrontation. Furthermore, North Korea may assess that the benefits of opportunistic provocations outweigh the costs. During regional crises, it might aim for limited objectives, such as demonstrating strategic importance, altering the status quo, or negotiating a political settlement with the US. The costs may be deemed low when North Korea expects US attention to be diverted from the Korean Peninsula, potentially anticipating a delayed or constrained response.

North Korea's response to simultaneous crises in Northeast Asia would be highly dependent on the context, particularly China's readiness to engage on a second front in the Korean Peninsula. This readiness is crucial in determining the sustainability of North Korea's actions in an extended conflict. Should China reduce its military posturing in the Taiwan Strait, it would indicate its interest in preventing the ignition of a military conflict with the US. If North Korea provoked a crisis on the Korean Peninsula in such a scenario, China would be unlikely to intervene, possibly leading to a resolution favouring the US-ROK alliance. However, if China acts to alter the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, that could indirectly aid North Korea, which shares similar objectives with regard to the Korean Peninsula. In this case, a limited war might be prolonged, with the United States and South Korea potentially having to divide their focus between two fronts, while the United States concentrates on preserving the status quo in Taiwan. This scenario might lead North Korea to assess the cost of causing a crisis as low.

Should China engage in a high-intensity military operation, contemplating a full-scale war with Taiwan, it might seek military cooperation with North Korea to disperse US military resources. In such a scenario, the cost of conflict for North Korea would increase as the US would not withdraw the forces needed for South Korea's defence, and the ROK military would concentrate on defending the Korean Peninsula. A critical factor here is the extent and duration of China's support for North Korea, which alone may not sustain a prolonged war. The likelihood of China engaging in a high-intensity operation against South Korea as part of the conflict with Taiwan is low, as this would result in not only military and economic friction with South Korea but also a long-term enhancement of the US-ROK alliance.

South Korea taking assertive actions in the West Sea would necessitate a heightened state of readiness from China's Northern Theatre Command. This could reduce the immediate availability of Chinese forces for a Taiwan crisis, an undesirable outcome for China. Therefore, the scenarios in which North Korea could benefit from a Taiwan crisis are limited.

Table 3. Crisis assessment: risk and uncertainty

	Engagement level	Risk	Uncertainty
High	China attacks US military base in South Korea with missiles ²⁹	South Korean military's ability to strike within range of Chinese major cities	Public opinion in South Korea on engagement and US-ROK military readiness
	Sino-DPRK coalition to demonstrate force	Economic losses for both sides due to maritime cargo damage	Delayed relocation of the USFK
	China indirectly supports North Korea's provocations	Prolonged disputes at a limited level	UNC force provider cooperation
Low	China's non-involvement	Favourable end-state for the US-ROK alliance	New equilibrium

Implications for crisis stability

Crisis stability on the Korean Peninsula will face challenges under specific conditions. North Korea's dissatisfaction with the current political and military balance is a significant factor influencing its decision to provoke incidents. If North Korea perceives its position as being undermined or threatened, it is likely to carefully assess the benefits against the risks of using force. Misinterpretations of the situation can also contribute to crisis instability. North Korea's expectations of shifts in US response priorities, potential domestic divisions within South Korean society, or rifts in the US-South Korea alliance could be the causes of misperceptions.

Creating a situation where North Korea does not feel compelled to strike first to achieve a more favourable outcome is crucial. Traditional deterrence theory suggests that enhancing escalation dominance – maintaining a markedly superior position over an adversary across various escalation levels – could dissuade North Korea from further escalation. However, effectively managing a crisis also involves avoiding signals of military preparation for war against North Korea, slowing down the tempo of military activities, and providing avenues for peaceful crisis resolution.³⁰ Studies on strategic stability indicate that new military capabilities, when integrated into operations, may offer decisive advantages and create incentives for pre-emptive actions.³¹ With the rapid development of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, including cruise missile and hypersonic systems, it becomes more challenging to reduce escalatory pressures during a crisis. These dual-capable platforms, suitable for pre-emptive strikes on critical targets, could also heighten vulnerability for South Korea, undermining de-escalation efforts.

The situation has been further complicated by North Korea's withdrawal from the 'Comprehensive Military Agreement' (CMA) signed in 2018, which aimed to reduce the risk of deliberate clashes between the two Koreas. Following South Korea's decision to partially suspend the CMA, North Korea threatened to deploy

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more forces and new weapons along its border with South Korea. Without both sides being committed to defusing tension and conflict through military confidence-building measures in air, land, and sea domains, activities such as conducting large-scale drills as shows of force along the fortified border, relocating guard posts previously removed from the demilitarised zone, and resuming reconnaissance patrols in buffer zones along the sea border will significantly destabilise the situation on the Korean Peninsula, both in peacetime and during contingencies.

Recommendations

This report analysed the likelihood of North Korea pre-emptively using nuclear weapons or threatening their use to instigate a military crisis, as speculated in previous studies. The findings indicate a low probability of such actions, based on conditions like the difficulty of limiting damage on the compact Korean Peninsula, North Korea's inability to control crisis escalation following limited nuclear use, and the predominantly defensive posture of the US-ROK alliance. However, the report acknowledges that North Korea might launch a pre-emptive attack under very specific conditions. It examines these issues from both arms control stability and crisis stability perspectives. The ongoing military modernisation efforts of both Koreas are fuelling an arms race on the Peninsula, leading to the development of mutually lethal weapons and escalating the potential costs in a crisis. In a dual crisis on the Korean Peninsula and in Taiwan, tensions are likely to increase due to misinterpretations and misunderstandings if there are no crisis management channels between the two Koreas. The report proposes the following policy considerations for risk reduction and crisis management:

Resuming inter-Korean dialogue

Currently, there's a lack of inter-Korean dialogue for building trust, which needs to be established to prevent unintended conflict. South Korea's 'Audacious Initiative', proposed in August 2022, lacks military confidence-building measures and requires further development. Additionally, the initiative's focus on mutual reciprocity raises concerns for North Korea about the steps it must take in response to South Korea's initial actions. Fostering sustainable dialogue with North Korea depends on convincing Pyongyang that engagement is mutually beneficial rather than a zero-sum game. Initiating preparatory meetings to develop a mutually agreeable path for resuming dialogue is essential. Establishing an operational hotline could prevent inadvertent confrontations, effectively deterring both sides from accidentally escalating tensions.

Crisis management dialogues with China

While preparing responses to potential Chinese reactions is crucial, South Korea should also initiate the establishment of a dedicated communication channel with China. This crisis management channel would be critical during heightened tensions in the region. China is more likely to engage in dialogues about softer security issues, such as economic and energy crises, rather than a military crisis involving North Korea. Therefore, a realistic approach would be to first establish a Track II-level platform for comprehensive discussion on Korean Peninsula crisis management. This could involve a bypass approach of fostering more academic dialogues as a foundation for future formal discussions on specific issues like early warning and de-escalation. This two-stage strategy – starting with academic forums and progressing to government-to-government dialogue – could begin with an exchange of information between governments and private sectors, supplemented by collaborative research studies. Understanding China's objectives, whether to discourage South Korean involvement or to avoid accidental clashes, is crucial for developing clear crisis management strategies. This insight would guide strategies to mitigate unnecessary allied responses and prevent a spiral of crisis escalation.

Regional dialogue for security cooperation

Establishing confidence-building measures for crisis management in Asia is of paramount importance. North Korea is unlikely to start a full-scale war in Northeast Asia due to the risks of a protracted crisis and US military intervention. However, it may engage in grey-zone conflict, employing tactics like information, psychological, and cyber warfare. In scenarios involving multiple crises in Asia, South Korea must proactively prepare for a potential Taiwan crisis and collaborate with friendly nations to address conflicts within their respective regions. The South Korean government should work with the US and US allies, focusing on sharing information, developing response measures, coordinating messages, and identifying communication channels for contingencies. This approach would enable allies to manage complex situations more effectively.

Dialogue between allies

The South Korean government needs to proactively engage in discussions with the US about potential crises involving Taiwan and suitable response strategies. These strategic dialogues should cover various scenarios in the Taiwan Strait, focusing on the level and nature of non-combat and rear support to enhance the US military's strategic adaptability. South Korea must also internally debate its role in a US-Taiwan crisis, making it clear that the ROK military's focus on deterring North Korean provocations is not a neglect of alliance responsibilities but a strategic decision to deter China's military actions and avoid a two-front conflict.

Developing flexible response measures

In a crisis, it is crucial to convey to adversaries that the survival of their state is not at risk and that resolution is possible without conflict escalation. The goal should be to reduce incentives for escalation and facilitate stable relations after tensions rise. Slowing down response times and favouring retaliatory, as opposed to pre-emptive, strikes can aid crisis management. Having a range of options beyond all-out warfare is essential for flexible response. Ensuring crisis stability involves creating a scenario that does not threaten the opponent's survival and managing factors that could escalate the crisis. Relying exclusively on nuclear options might inadvertently weaken deterrence credibility. Therefore, developing a variety of adaptable responses is critical to prevent rapid escalation. The US and South Korea should work together to create detailed response plans for near-nuclear crises.

Negotiation on arms control

Engaging in an arms race based on asymmetric capabilities can create instability. Future negotiations should address both nuclear risk reduction and conventional arms control. This approach does not disregard the goal of disarming North Korea in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner. However, considering that South Korean and American military capabilities are perceived as threatening by Pyongyang, future dialogues should also address North Korea's security concerns for sustainable and practical

negotiations. Linking nuclear and conventional arms control suggests restraints on both North Korean nuclear weapons and the conventional military capabilities of the US-ROK allied forces. Restructuring the current separate format—nuclear talks between the US and North Korea and conventional weapons talks between North and South Korea—can address a broader set of challenges, including the stability-instability paradox, the blending of conventional and nuclear deterrence, and coordination issues between the US and South Korea. Announcing a comprehensive arms control measure could also incentivise, or at least pressure, North Korea to recognise South Korea's commitment in military discussions and begin negotiating corresponding measures.

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