

Chapter 17

America's Squid Game: Why the Korean Conflict Is a Prisoner's Dilemma

Iskren Ivanov

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9967-6251>

Sofia University, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

The Korean Conflict has been among the most powerful pillars of the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Yet, that balance changed after North Korea launched its nuclear program. The American presence in the region, on the other side, has had considerable implications for South Korea's national security and its capabilities to defend. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it theorizes the security dilemma between North and South Korea and calculates the probability of nuclear escalation. Second, the chapter explores the effects of North Korea's nuclear program on the bilateral relations between Washington and Seoul, particularly regarding Pyongyang's consistent rapprochement with Russia. The most important point of this study is to challenge the statement that South Korea can effectively deter the North without achieving nuclear parity with Pyongyang. Finally, the chapter stresses the difference between the Korean Peninsula's old and new realities.

INTRODUCTION

The Korean conflict has existed for more than half a century, and in a sense, the world has merely con-vened to the status quo on the divided Peninsula. Yet, the security dilemma between South and North Korea shifted after Pyongyang launched its nuclear program. The prospect of military escalation with the United States and its allies remains realistic and – to a certain extent – challenges South Korean attitudes to the deterrent force of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The mere idea of peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas is no longer sufficient to provide their policymakers with political legitimacy for their foreign policies. It would be misleading to believe that Seoul will easily abandon its nuclear free policy, but the fact that the nuclear arsenal of North Korea could inflict critical damage on the South would inevitably

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change the perceptions and the behavior of both parties. That said, a better understanding of the security dilemma dynamics on the Korean Peninsula could provide us with more empirical knowledge about the future of this conflict and its potential implications for Northeast Asia.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it theorizes the security dilemma between North and South Korea and calculates the probability of nuclear escalation. Second, the chapter explores the effects of North Korea's nuclear program on the bilateral relations between Washington and Seoul, particularly regarding Pyongyang's consistent rapprochement with Russia. The most important point of this study is to challenge the statement that South Korea can effectively deter the North without achieving nuclear parity with Pyongyang. While this argument is still subject to a large political and public dispute, I assume that the Korean Peninsula no longer corresponds to the security architecture of a nuclear-weapons-free zone, and thus – the implications of North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program have not been fully appreciated. Therefore, four principal contradictions emerge from the present situation: South Korea possesses one of the most powerful militaries in the world, almost three times that of Pyongyang, yet it cannot protect itself from the North's nuclear weapons; the prospect of another military confrontation between Seoul and Pyongyang coexists with the natural fear of imminent preemptive strike; what Washington promise Seoul to do in case of North Korean attack would escalate the crisis further; levels of the North's militarization has disproportionately increased since its rapprochement with Russia. The key to regulating the security dilemma on the Peninsula, thus, requires a reassessment of the nature of the security sources in the changed nuclear environment.

Although military success could be achieved at enormous expense, political victory will highly depend on the U.S. support for Seoul. Thus, the central claim of this chapter is that only through nuclear deterrence could the balance of power be sustained to regulate the security dilemma between the two Koreas. The significant challenge for South Korean policymakers in coming to grips with the idea of a fully nuclearized Peninsula would be best predetermined by their ability to respond to the ultimate dilemma – whether the U.S. nuclear umbrella could make South Korea more or less secure with Pyongyang, sophisticating its military program. The well-established reply – that the U.S. military presence in South Korea decreases the chance of another clash with the North and secures the U.S.-ROK alliance – is only a theoretical answer, although it is correct. That said, the ongoing nuclear debate in ROK does not contradict the mutual trust between Seoul and Washington, it instead seeks to explore whether the deterrent force of the U.S. umbrella, under the guise of security guarantees, will be enough to deter the growing nuclear power of North Korea.

Finally, the chapter stresses the difference between the Korean Peninsula's old and new realities. What would be new to the security dilemma is not the probability of mutual reaction by both parties but the present ability of North Korea to inflict as much damage on the other party as the United States could on Pyongyang. Although the political leadership of the North would not be spared in case of a South Korean retaliation, the level of destruction will surpass that expected by America and its allies. Added to those realities is the fact that conventional warfare presumes sufficient time for bargaining, while a nuclear-armed actor is less inclined to negotiate and quicker to act. Since mutual vulnerability is no longer a source of security, deterrence remains the ultimate strategy of both parties to balance each other. That said, while the U.S. umbrella has been designed to prevent a potential conflict or limit the damage, the force, or the threat of it can no longer support ROK's foreign policy as it did in the past.

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